

MAY 3, 2020 REFLECTIONS

Matthew 11:28-29

²⁸ ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

In the second of my reflections on Spiritual Practices, I wanted to turn to **silence** which is an important partner of the first one we looked at last week, **solitude**. Solitude invites silence and for people like Henri Nouwen, true silence brings rest for our souls.

How do you ‘hear’ the word silence? What sort of emotions and feelings does it give rise to? Are they negative or positive? Is this unfamiliar territory?

Looking back on my childhood, I was brought up in a culture that did not ‘do’ silence – there was always activity, always noise in our home and on the farm. I cannot remember mealtimes (except when we had guests), without the background noise of the radio or later the TV ‘listening’ to the news or a farming program. Of course, this was totally inadequate because it meant we were neither listening to each other or to the radio/tv – we were distracted and not fully present.

This is my bridge into why silence is so important to cultivate in our lives and in our worship. Often, when people talk to me about spiritual fatigue, I discover that the noise and busyness of life has meant the (radical) spiritual practices of solitude and silence have been neglected or were never cultivated. These are two of the most foundational practices to enable us to be fully present to ourselves, to God and the world. The transformative power to experience healing and to be loved by God happens here most of all. Yet, even in our gatherings for worship – there is a tendency to fill any and all silences rather than entering into them.

True spiritual silence is not just the absence of (human made) noise, rather it opens us up to the hidden presence of God in our lives (and links back to the ‘true self’ discussed last week). The paradox is that I cannot describe the silence in words...as that betrays the very absence of silence!

Here, I now defer to Nouwen who is more eloquent than me who writes (*please excuse the gendered language*):

Silence means rest, rest of body and mind in which we become available for him whose heart is greater than ours.

That is very threatening; it is like giving up control over our actions and thoughts, allowing something creative to happen not by us but to us. *Is it so amazing that we are so often tired and exhausted, trying to be masters of ourselves, wanting to grasp the ultimate meaning of our existence, struggling with our identity?*

Silence is that moment in which we not only stop the discussion with others but also the inner discussions with ourselves, in which we can breathe in freely and accept our identity as a gift. “Not I live, but He lives in me.”

It is in this silence that the Spirit of God can pray in us and continue his creative work in us. . . .
Without silence the Spirit will die in us and the creative energy of our life will float away and leave us alone, cold, and tired. Without silence we will lose our centre and become the victim of the many who constantly demand our attention.

Again, I think there is a huge amount here to reflect upon but if I may pick up this idea of surrendering control. In Psalm 37:7a, we are told to “be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” And “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10a). To be still and also surrender to the sovereignty of God. I believe here we encounter God as ‘the ground of being’.

Yet, as Nouwen acknowledges, this is threatening. Thomas Merton echoes the same sentiment saying “*It is not speaking that breaks our silence, but the anxiety to be heard.*”

Having a voice is really important, for some of us it has taken us years to find it and here I am suggesting that we give that up? Not at all. To whom is this directed? To God, who knows us more fully than we do. We do not need to strive, or be validated by others, we are before our Creator – here, we can be fully known.....and that transforms me and you in ways I cannot begin to explain.

Questions to aid reflection (*I have added in some more quotes which may be helpful*)

1. Nouwen famously stated “Silence is solitude practiced in action”. How do you understand that statement? Can you think of an incident where silence, was more powerful than words (does not need to be yours).
2. “The word no longer communicates, no longer fosters communion, no longer creates community, and therefore no longer gives life” (Nouwen). Where do you experience an overabundance of words diminishing the quality of your life?
3. For the Desert Fathers “the word is the instrument of the present world and silence is the mystery of the future world” (quoted by Nouwen). How do you interpret this statement?
4. “Our first and foremost task is faithfully to care for the inward fire so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers” (Nouwen). How could silence help with this?

5. Does silence during a worship service make you feel uneasy? Can you account for your answer? Are there ways in which the Leaders of a service could assist your deepening encounter of God in these moments?

Practical Suggestions:

We are 'wired' differently and will need different things to cultivate periods of silence in our day. It maybe that the following can help:

- If your ultimate aim is to have a block of 20 mins of silence; you might want to start with chunks of 2-3 minutes and add.
- Breathing deeply as intentional preparation can be helpful
- Identify a place (at home or in nature, whatever) which helps you to still your heart and mind.
- You may do certain activities to signal to yourself that you are having your time of silence (turn the TV off, light a candle, etc).
- Turn off all human sound (including music, phones, technology)
- When your thoughts drift, do not judge but bring them back to being attentive to God.
- Don't give up, it takes time.