

Sermon Transcript

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November 26, 2006
Hand-in-Hand

Where is God? Where is God in this place? Where is God in this place, in this moment? Every week, my spiritual director asked me these questions. As I walked the mile to her office, I dreaded them. I dreaded them because I had no idea what the answer was. Where was God? Often, I felt that God's only presence was absence, and that despite my best hopes, yet again, nothing of consequence had happened that week. Many weeks I would harbor disappointment that I had absolutely nothing to talk about.

I would arrive at the Center, and my director would lead me to our meeting room. After exchanging our greetings, we would settle into our chairs and into silence. She would attentively wait. And it was there — in the waiting — in the silence — that I would *discover* my story. It would come into being precisely because I had a caring audience. The stories — my stories — were as new to my director as they were to me. In this space, events I had overlooked as inconsequential assumed a divine gravity. In this space, simple joys, like feeding the squirrels on the Boston Common, became representative of God's abundance and mirth.

Feminist theologian Nelle Morton describes a workshop that she conducted. One of the participants was a "quiet, almost frightened" woman, who was silent. Morton did not push her, but waited. On the last day of the workshop, the woman wandered off alone. When they later gathered in small groups, she started hesitatingly, awkwardly, "I hurt. I hurt all over...But I don't know where to begin to cry," she said, "I don't know how to begin to cry." She began to talk, gaining momentum and coherence. She reached a point of excruciating pain and no one moved, no one interrupted her, no one comforted her — the group sat in powerful silence. Finally, as the woman finished her story she spoke again: "You heard me. You heard me all the way. I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story. *You heard me to my own speech.*"¹

James Carse, a scholar of the history and literature of religion, distinguishes between two kinds of silence: the silence of obedience and the silence of expectation.² The silence of obedience is the silence that occurs in the presence of a powerful person. It is to give away one's choice to speak in deference to the other person's authority. It can be a silence of respect. But, if the powerful person takes away our choice to speak, it is a silence of oppression. It is a silence in which we lose our voice.³

On the other hand, the silence of expectation is the silence that makes our speech possible. Carse writes, "...unless we have someone to speak to we cannot speak, and unless someone is listening there is no one to whom we can speak."⁴ He continues, "it is always the case that when someone listens to you with genuine openness you will find a voice to say what you have never been able to say before, and did not know you could have said...it is not that sensitive listening will lead you to *discover* a new depth to yourself; it will *create* a new depth."⁵

¹ Nelle Morton. *The Journey is Home*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. 204-5.

² James P. Carse. *The Silence of God: Meditations on Prayer*. New York: HarperCollins, 1985. 23

³ *Ibid.* 25.

⁴ *Ibid.* 26.

⁵ *Ibid.* 30.

This is the silence of Nelle Morton's group of women, the silence of my spiritual director. It is the white page under the pen, the attentive silence on the telephone line, the blank computer screen before us, the empty pitcher, the congregation before the pulpit, the minister attentive to the congregation.

As the poet writes,

...we talk about the living it takes

*talk until
years fall down like rain...*

*and we bring back ourselves,
filled with our lives.⁶*

We try to create opportunities to hear one another into speech: small group ministry, fellowship time, the silence in the Sanctuary, team check-ins, the pastoral encounter. We might be heard-into-speech by close friend, a therapist, a peace-keeping circle, a 12-step group. We come here in a free and responsible search for Truth. Thoreau suggests that "It takes two to speak the truth — one to speak and the other to listen."⁷ We come to church to do both.

We might think of spiritual companionship as this partnership in which we each speak and we each listen, walking hand-in-hand. And what do we speak? In that silence of expectation, we find the stories of our lives. It is in telling our stories, discovering our stories, that we find ourselves and create community.

Storytelling as such is varied: it occurs in the formal discourses of the academy, in the "stories" of the political administration, in intimate tales shared with a therapist, and in our quotidian account of our day shared with a friend. When we tell a story we claim our agency. You know how it goes — it's the end of the day and you tell your friend about the person who cut you off in traffic. As you recount the event, you are no longer quite as small as you felt at the time, by naming the situation, by telling your story, you have claimed your agency. When we tell our stories, we engage with the perennial human struggle to balance our terminal uniqueness with a sense of shared reality. We are all storytellers — and we are all story-keepers.

This is the work of spiritual companionship. It is important work because storytelling forms the basis of our common world. This world simultaneously relates and separates us. It is like the dinner table — if it vanishes we are no longer separated but no longer joined.⁸

Our common reality depends upon our ability to share our stories. This is the work of the church: to provide the space in which we encounter the presence of others who see and hear what we do, sustaining our shared world and reaching into the beyond. In coming together, we are assured us of the reality of the world and of ourselves. We share our sacred stories in scriptures, our denomination's history, and in the sacred stories of our lives. Our stories *create* our world. Our silence *creates* our stories.

Yet, we cannot have silence without bravery. Winston Churchill said "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."⁹ Courage is what it takes for one person to truly listen to one another, for one nation to truly listen to one another. Oppression is the silence of obedience extrapolated into the larger realm. It is when one group of people speaks in order to make

⁶ Greg Kosmicki. "Sometimes we don't Talk Much, Debbie and I." thewritersalmanac.publicradio.org, November 15, 2006.

⁷ Source unknown.

⁸ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. 52.

⁹ Source unknown.

another group silent. It is denying the stories of another until we deny their entire existence, the precursor to atrocity known.

Listening, then, can be a prophetic act. Hear the words of Isaiah: “Each morning God wakes me, to hear, to listen like those who are taught. God has opened my ear.”¹⁰ Listening — person to person — is how we can transform our country and our world. Our country is quite good at standing up and speaking. We would do well to remember that “Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” These are the conditions for peace between neighbors and between nations.

What might we say then of the silence of God? Our liberal theology doesn’t see God as a divine magistrate forcing us into a silence of obedience. Rather, the silence of God is the divine invitation into our own speech. God’s silence is hearing us into speech. Carse writes, “...in an encounter with divine reality we do not hear a voice but acquire a voice; and the voice we acquire is our own.”¹¹ God’s silence might be the most profound silence — the most profound invitation — we ever know.

After he received his medical degree, Carl Jung interned at a hospital with women who had become mute. The doctors tried to *give* the women *their* language. “They were trying to speak the women to hearing.” Dr. Jung took a different approach. He observed the women’s repetitive movements and words, and over time, he imitated the women’s mannerisms and sounds back to them. He repeated this over and over again, waiting, and waiting. Slowly, one woman at a time recognized the connection, and began to communicate. “He had heard them into speech...to their own speech.”¹² Over time, some of the women recovered their own stories. Others created new stories. Many became well enough to be released from the hospital.

Spiritual companions are the people who take the time to hear us into our own speech, into our own story, *all the way*. Spiritual companions have the courage to stand up and speak, and the courage to sit down and listen. They are our partners on the journey.

Nelle Morton suggests that, “Maybe “journey” is not so much a journey ahead, or a journey into space, but a journey into presence. The farthest place on earth is the journey into the presence of the nearest person to you.”¹³

This is our path: the journey into the presence of another person. It is in that journey we might find forgiveness, agency, and peace. It is in this journey that we might find ourselves. It is in that journey that we might find God. Extend your hands into one another’s, we extend your hearts in to the silence. What songs we will hear! This is the path we walk together, friends, hand-in-hand.

¹⁰ Adapted from Isaiah 50:4-5.

¹¹ Carse 8.

¹² Morton 209-210.

¹³ Morton 227.