

When Silence Becomes a Sin

Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-13

The phrase has been attributed to Abraham Lincoln. It is a saying full of wisdom. “*Better to remain silent and let everybody think you’re a fool, than to speak and to remove all doubt.*” Here is the way I take it. The phrase not only speaks of the importance of silence, but it also speaks of the importance of sharing wisdom when we speak.

Like many other things in life, being silent about certain things, depending on the situation, could be beneficial or very detrimental. Silence could be a sign of wisdom, or it could be an indication of cowardice or complicity. There is a negative and a positive side to silence, so we need to be discerning people and know when to speak up and when to remain silent.

Even though I want to encourage you to speak up when the moment is right, I also want to take a few seconds to remind you of the devastating outcomes of speaking without prayerful discernment. I guess we all know what I am referring to. Perhaps, you have shared a not very well-articulated opinion at some point and those words are still haunting you. Or perhaps, you know of someone who has gone through a similar situation.

I want this sermon to inspire you to speak up when you see things that are not right. I hope our conversations today will motivate you to speak up with the intent to bring healing and unity in a world deeply divided and broken. It is NOT my purpose to make you swing from the extreme of absolute silence to acute and constant rattling. I do not want anybody to move from one unhealthy location to another detrimental position. If being continually silent about difficult issues is not good, always having an opinion and insisting on sharing it is not helpful either.

The book of Proverbs reminds us: “*When there are **many words**, transgression and offense are unavoidable, but he who controls his lips and keeps **thoughtful silence** is wise.*” **Proverbs 10:19 AMP**

We know that extremes are not good. It is my hope and prayer that God will use our conversations this morning to bring all of us to a position where our silence is not produced by “self-protective” attitudes, fears and shallow niceness, neither is our speaking full of unexamined opinions. May we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, learn how to keep thoughtful silence when this is the appropriate thing to do, and speak loving, truthful, constructive words, full of wisdom and courage, when the times demand so. May God help us reach a place where we can fully know and understand the words of the author of Ecclesiastes, “*There is a proper time to keep silence, and a time to speak*” (Ecclesiastes 3:7).

So, this morning I want us to think about the following questions. **When does silence become a sin? When does silence create more harm than good? When does silence become unhealthy?**

At a personal level, not being able to name our weaknesses, wrongdoings, biases, and so forth keeps us in a vicious cycle. So, in this specific case, silence is not healthy. It hurts us.

The first and most important step in a good number of recovery programs is to admit one's problem. The process of admitting one's addiction can be difficult, but it is also powerful, healing, and liberating. Experts and counselors encourage those having difficulties to acknowledge their struggle by saying it out loud, first to oneself and then to others.

Naming, recognizing, and saying out loud unhealthy behaviors and attitudes is the first step in the healing process. This is a biblical principle. The psalmist wrote, "*When I did not confess [kept silence about] my sins, I was worn out from crying all day long...Then I confessed my sins to you; I did not conceal my wrongdoings. I decided to confess them to you, and you forgave all my sins*" (**Psalm 32:3, 5 GNT**). James wrote, "*confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed*" (**James 5:16**).

So, trying to cover up our struggles with silence only creates the perfect conditions for us to become prisoners of harmful habits and behaviors. So, we need to speak about our struggles first to God, and then to trusted family members and friends. If we don't do this, the silence we keep will make us sicker.

Moreover, silence becomes harmful at a personal level when our inability to recognize our weaknesses leads us to adopt hypocritical attitudes in life. There are times we cannot name our shortcomings and then we project them onto others. Jesus said to those who say to their neighbor, "*Let me take the speck out of your eye,*" while the log is in their own eye... "*hypocrites, first take the log out of your own eyes, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye*" (**Matthew 7:4**).

I want to point out something really interesting in this well-known biblical episode. Jesus never argued that the neighbor did not have a speck in his/her eye. What Jesus is arguing is that the habit of not recognizing, seeing, and naming our own shortcomings make us blind; therefore, unable to provide an objective and constructive evaluation.

Most of us are very familiar with the phrase "*speaking the truth in love.*" It comes from the letter the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians saying: "...*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...*" (**Ephesians 4:15 NIV**). Now, if we want to speak the truth, give a truthful assessment about something, first we need to recognize and name our own inclinations. If we do not take this first step, we will be speaking our minds and our biases but not giving an honest, objective assessment.

In order to speak truth to others, we have to speak it to ourselves first. That's one of the lessons we can learn from Jesus' statement about paying attention to the log in one's own eyes. We need to see and speak our personal truths first and foremost.

Speaking truth to ourselves can lead us to be more sensitive people. This practice will help us speak not only the truth, but do so in love. Speaking truth to ourselves will help us see our shared humanity with the rest of the world. It will help us stand not in opposition but in solidarity with others.

So, silence at a personal level not only creates the perfect conditions for us to become prisoners of destructive forces; it also leads us to adopt hypocritical attitudes in life. Furthermore, when we do not speak truth to ourselves, we are unable to speak truth to others which we know is a hindrance to growth. Yet, speaking our own truth will help us speak truth to others and do so in love.

That's at a personal level. The question now is, **when and how does silence become a sin in a group setting? When is silence dangerous to the larger community?**

Friar Vincent of Beauvais, a Dominican monk and scholar, wrote about the sin of being silent. This is what he said:

“The tongue must be watched, but not inflexibly arrested. For it is a vice, by keeping quiet, to allow someone unworthy or unfit to be chosen for promotions and honors, or permit someone worthy to lose his dignity, goods or honor.

The same can be said if, in meetings of the council, you keep quiet out of ignorance or malice and thus withhold the truth from the other advisers. Likewise, during a court hearing, if you see someone make a fraudulent accusation or be unjustly condemned, you will sin. And if you fail to reprehend the detractors in conversations defaming others by neither excusing nor praising the person defamed, you will sin by remaining silent. Likewise, when you perceive that a word to edify, instruct, exhort or correct someone is necessary, you commit a sin if you withhold that wholesome advice.”¹

That is exactly the advice Paul gave to the church in Ephesus: *“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather **expose** them... [because] everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and **everything that is illuminated becomes a light**”* (Ephesians 5:11, 13). Paul's point is this: “Speak up!!! Speak the truth in love! Do not remain silent when the situation is demanding you to speak!”

People of God, our faith calls us to get active and engage in the ministry of reconciliation we have received from Jesus. We need to carefully bring our positions and opinions to the light of the Scriptures and God-Holy Spirit. Because, if our positions and opinions are one-sided, we are only poking wounds and deepening fractures. And, we are called to be people who reconcile, not divide.

¹ Retrieved from http://www.traditioninaction.org/religious/n077rp_Taciturnitatis.htm

As God's people, we are in the business of bringing transformation to the world. And, as Paul said, the fruitless deeds of darkness will be transformed when we *expose* them, because *"everything that is illuminated becomes a light."* That's why it is so important we talk about our personal and community failures. It's only by exposing the shadows that they become light.

Yes, our faith calls us to speak up against rioting, looting, and vindictive acts of violence. But, our faith also calls us to rally against bigotry, systemic racism, and other injustices. We need to speak about the viruses that infect our hearts and the heart of our nation. We need to expose them. And, as we do, Christ's light will shine for all to see.

Here is something very practical for all of us to do. If the conversation around racial disparity and injustice creates a sense of discomfort, tension, or uneasiness in you, I invite you to spend some time talking to Jesus about WHY it bothers you. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your heart to a place of conviction. It is only by having that conversation, by naming our discomfort, that God will bring transformation to our lives. Then, we will become instruments in furthering God's kingdom on earth; a realm where all people – regardless of their skin color, ethnicity, religion, identity or sexuality – might flourish.

Church, we are called to be proactive in promoting that which is good and resisting that which is evil. Apathy, fence-sitting and refusal to engage are not options for the biblical Christian. You cannot let fears keep you silent. Do not use "ignorance" as an excuse to show indifference in the face of injustice and unfairness. If you don't have enough knowledge, seek to educate yourself. Do not let the desire for peace and order numb your sense of justice.

The great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: *"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."* In other words, there are times when our silence is soundless approval.

Dear people of God, speak truth to yourselves, so you can speak truth to others in a loving sensitive manner. Once you have done this, "...proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching...carry out your ministry fully." Remember, *"...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..."* **Ephesians 4:15 NIV**

This is the word of God for all people.