

Death by Suburb sermon series
#2 – Silence: Can You Hear Me Now?
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When I first got out of seminary, I was part of a group of new pastors called the Bethany Fellows. We met twice a year in various places around the country for relationship-building, educational opportunities, and spiritual renewal. I loved those retreats, except for one part. Each retreat featured a period of 24 hours of silence. Me. Being silent. For 24 hours. One retreat in Phoenix I learned that the Diamondbacks baseball team was playing during our day of silence, so I promised the retreat leader if he let me go I'd only cheer in my head. I didn't get to go.

I don't think I'm the only one who feels that way about silence. There's a reason that a lot of silences are called "awkward," because we don't know what to do with them. I believe we are conditioned to fill the silence. One of the things I taught about in my Public Speaking classes were vocalized pauses. You know what those are: "Um," "like," "you know." Our brain uses those almost involuntarily to avoid leaving a gap of silence until our next thought. So instead of a noiseless pause until our next word, we break the silence with "Umm..."

The fear of silence places more insidious roles in our lives. Think about the times we feel compelled to break a silence: When we're standing with a grieving person at the funeral home, when we are sitting in the hospital waiting room, when our friend has just told us about her troubled marriage, we can't just NOT say something. There's a Zen saying that goes, "Only speak if you can improve the silence." When I first started making hospital visits in seminary, I had a lot of trouble being in a room with someone without saying something. Surely there was something I could say to help, to make things better, to fix this problem, to end this silence.

Why is silence so scary for us? Moments of silence feel like eternities to us because we are so used to having noise in our lives. That even extends to our pets. Often times, when Amy and I leave the house, we'll leave the TV on for the dogs. Not once have Parker or Maddie said, "Hey, could you put on the Real HouseDogs of Atlanta?" We think they don't like the silence because we don't like the silence. The irony is that it is in the silence where we are mostly likely to hear God. And yet, our lives are absolutely overflowing with noise.

Amy and I love our house, which we've lovingly named Ocean View Farm, and some mornings we'll sit in the backyard and watch the chickens and dogs go about their morning routine. It's so quiet, so peaceful...for about 30 seconds, until the neighbor starts blaring his old-time gospel music or the buzzsaw drone of a motorbike goes zooming past our house. We don't always have to fill the silence; sometimes it's filled for us.

Even when we can find silence, I think it scares us. We are afraid to be silent because we're afraid of what we might hear. If we're not listening, we don't have to worry about hearing what God has to say to us. I think we spend a lot of time distracting ourselves with noise in order to keep from thinking about things we don't want to think about, like doubt and death and the future, or to avoid hearing God's word for us, like how God is calling us into the deep end of our faith. We use noise as an insulation, packing it around us tightly so nothing – not even the voice of God – can get through.

P.M. Forni, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, says that noise is “all part of a phenomenon expressed in ancient Latin as *horrovacui*.” Sounds like a Harry Potter curse, doesn’t it? *Horrovacui* is the fear of emptiness. He said we often overuse electronic gadgets for the same reason we spend innumerable hours shopping or in front of the TV: we don’t want to be left alone with our own thoughts. Or our God.

So instead of creating space for God to speak, instead of turning over that control, we cling to it. And there’s is so much in our lives we can control! We control the exact temperature of our side of the car and we control the exact firmness of our side of the bed. We control when our sprinklers come on and when our lights go out. And we control when – or if – we listen to God. As long as we are in control, we don’t have to worry about what God might tell us to do. And we are in control, aren’t we?

Haha! No. We’re not. Yes, we control the temperature in our car, but not all the other crazy drivers on the road. We live with the illusion of control, which can give us a false sense of comfort. But deep down, we know the truth. In an article about the illusion of control, one author said, “Death always drives the fastest car on the highway.” In other words, no matter how luxurious your SUV with the heated seats and the fancy cupholders, you still have to stop and wait when a funeral passes.

If we want to move out of spiritual suburbia and go deeper in our faith, the first thing we have to do is relinquish our illusion of control and turn that over to God. David Goetz says, “In true spirituality the first act is a decision not to act, which goes against all we believe. Shouldn’t we be doing something for Jesus? But before we do, we must be: to listen and wait for God, to make space for God.” In this age that values efficiency and control, intentionally deciding not to do something is a spiritual practice.

Look, I know that can be challenging. Here’s proof: even Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, had trouble getting away. Mark tells us, “Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Ah, sounds nice, doesn’t it? And yet, what happened? His disciples immediately tracked him down: “Everyone is looking for you!” We’d love to take the morning to get away and pray, but have you seen our email inboxes lately? Everyone is looking for us! How do we get away in spiritual suburbia, where the demands are constant and the noise is endless?

Maybe we don’t have to. If we think getting away from our noisy routine is the only way to hear God, we won’t even try to listen for God in the midst of our day-to-day routines. But here’s some good news for us: Goetz makes the point that quietness is more inside space than outside space. He says, “Solitude begins with the practice of being still. For one minute, two minutes, five minutes – to rest from our pursuit of efficiency.” As the psalmist says, be still and know that I am God. Being still reminds us that God is in control, and before we are called to do anything, we are called to simply be.

This is not easy. I struggle with being still. And, in my pursuit of efficiency, if I’m going to take time out of my busy and important schedule to be still, I want results. I want something to show for it. If God hasn’t spoken to me in the first, oh, 10 seconds or so, I get antsy. “Ok, God, I’m here, let’s do this.” If I can will my climate-controlled world into being, I should be able to will my God into conversation. And if God won’t speak to me when I want God to speak to me, what’s the point? Am I not entitled to that?

I believe that it is only when we are truly still that we can know God most deeply, but that’s not something we can add to our Google calendar for Thursday at 2:30 p.m. It

takes sustained discipline. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says, “It’s not easy to sit and trust that in solitude God will speak to you – not as a magical voice, but that God will let you know something gradually over the years.”

Years? I don’t have years! If I can have popcorn in three minutes and my clothes cleaned in an hour, I don’t want to have to wait years for anything. But it’s taken so many years to fill up our lives with noise that it’s going to take awhile to begin to empty it out, to clear some space in the clutter for God to come and abide with us, to speak to us, not in a voice that has to shout above the noise in our lives, but in a still small voice.

Is it possible to live the deeper life and the noisy life? Maybe, but I doubt it. And yet our lives are so full of noise, it’s hard to imagine living any other way. The reality is that if we aren’t intentional about building quietness into our lives, it will be quickly eaten up by the 100 things we have to do. We’ve been conditioned to think that relaxation is things like a glass of wine while talking with a friend, catching an episode of a show we’re watching, going shopping or to a restaurant. Those might indeed be relaxing, but there’s not quiet.

If we’re willing to try for real silence, the rewards can be renewing. We don’t have to go away to a secluded space to find silence; we just need to be intentional about seeking it where we are. Eric Sandras gives this advice: “In the morning, or in the evening, take five minutes and refuse to turn on any noise-making device (that can include family members). The regular exercise of silence can flush our minds clean of unwanted noise.” Tricia Rhodes calls this spiritual breathing. Mentally inhale the reality of God’s presence and exhale the noisy clamor inside of us. Inhale the peace of Christ and exhale the anxiety of the day. Just sit. Just be. Breathe. Listen. Give up your control. Be still. Look, the noise will still be waiting for you when you’re done. Everyone will still be looking for you. I promise. But for those few moments, remind yourself who is really the Lord in your life. Be still, and know that God is God – and you are not.