

SILENCE – Mark 6:30-34

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Father Cole Daily

If we want to understand Jesus, then we have to take silence seriously. I had to learn this through much difficulty, and I am still learning it. Five years ago, I took 30 days to make a silent retreat based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Yes, that means that I did not talk or watch TV or listen to music for 30 days. Surprisingly, you start to get used to the silence pretty quick. The first few days were a peaceful rest from the noise and confusion that constantly confronts us in life. The real challenge was not the physical act of not talking but of entering into the deeper places of my heart and my relationship with God. It can be a scary and sobering thing to be quiet. The questions that we often put to the side suddenly take stage-center. Who am I? Am I a good and holy person? How am I still able to live when I am so full of sin and selfishness? But in the midst of this reality-check, I realized definitively that I was not alone – I met Jesus there, or rather, He met me. “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” If we want to understand Jesus, then we have to take silence seriously, and that is a dangerous thing.

I am convinced that everyone here knows this. But...we are all stressed, we all have things that distract us, and perhaps we feel that silence is impossible in our modern American lives. Yet, Jesus’ words are not optional. Jesus says a lot of things in the Gospels, but if we think about it, He really doesn’t say much at all. For the first 30 years of his life, we have only a few lines of speech when He is twelve years old in the Temple. For the last three years of His public ministry, there are only enough words to fill a few short pages. It seems as though silence was a significant part of Jesus’ life on earth. We might be tempted

to think that this means He was lonely, but I would disagree. Jesus did not give in to the self-centered attitude of loneliness; rather, He entered into the alone-ness where the Father dwells. It is a scary thing to go here – we encounter the spiritual battle between good and evil like never before. To avoid this, we often use noise and busy-ness as a way to escape from confronting the evil in our hearts. If two people are riding in a car together and the conversation dies down, we instantly turn on some music. If everyone is tired after a long day, we immediately turn on the TV and watch Netflix rather than embrace the silence of reflection. But Jesus does not avoid silence – He runs toward it.

I am not telling you anything new. All the saints have taught us this simple truth from the beginning of the Church. Here are some examples:

St. Theresa of Calcutta: “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

St. John of the Cross: “Whenever anything disagreeable or displeasing happens to you, remember Christ crucified and be silent.”

St. Faustina: “... in order to hear the voice of God, one has to have silence in one's soul and to keep silence; not a gloomy silence but an interior silence; that is to say, recollection in God.”

The bottom line is that there is no way to be holy without silence in our lives. You can be involved in all sorts of programs and church groups; you can be on every parish council and every school committee; you can even raise all your kids to be priests and religious; but if we do not have silence in our lives, we will not be holy. If we want to meet Jesus, there is no shortcut. He is waiting for us in the silence.

Here is how we can begin. First, realize that silence is not an absence but a presence. It is not enough to refrain from making noise. Our thoughts have to be ordered and peaceful. Silence is something of the heart and mind – it is an attitude that opens us up to the Presence around us. St. Bernadette Soubiroux, the young girl who saw visions of Mary at Lourdes, France, is an example of this. She was often caught day-dreaming during school, and her friends mocked her. But for Bernadette, a tree was not simply a tree: it was a whole universe of possibility, of God's presence. Is it any wonder that Mary appeared to her? Maybe she was the only one who had the interior silence and openness to *see* her. Silence is more of an attitude than an absence. It opens us up to recognize the most important things in life.

But how can we begin? Start with Mass. Silence should be a significant part of the Mass. Notice how there are times when the priest prays silent prayers, or the stillness after the consecration. If you feel that these moments are long or awkward, I encourage you to enter into them. Let the silence open your hearts to the Presence around you. There are a few ways to do this. First, come to Mass recollected and quiet. Sure, you might be dragging screaming kids into Church, but you can still be quiet inside. It starts the morning of and even the night before. Do not fill your time with distracting things and stimulation. Read the readings at home; wake up and pray in quiet when the kids are still asleep. If we begin Mass with quiet, we should also end with quiet. There is an ancient practice of making a brief act of thanksgiving after Mass. It would be beautiful if everyone stayed here for even a few brief moments of prayer before leaving and talking to your neighbor. You will not offend Fr. Underwood or me if you take a few extra minutes before coming to say hi! It is more important that you remain in the Presence of God a little while longer.

Jesus often seems far away; He often seems to ignore our prayers; but He is actually nearer to us than we could imagine. He is waiting for you to be quiet. If we love Him, if we want to meet Him, there is no other way.