

“Silence Speaks”

People of Faith = People of Actions (Part 3)

James 3: 13-18

Mark 9: 30-37

9.23.18

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They didn't say anything. Mark says they didn't say anything because they were afraid. The disciples didn't understand what Jesus was saying, but they didn't ask him to clarify it for them because they were “afraid.”

Didn't matter that they'd been following this guy they called “Messiah” from town to town, watching him care for those in need... watching him heal the sick... watching him embrace the excluded... watching him spread the grace and mercy of God's kingdom. Didn't matter that the man himself was love incarnate—love in the flesh. They didn't say anything, because they were “afraid”???

Maybe they were afraid of looking foolish—of revealing their inability to see such a new way of living in this world. Or maybe they were afraid of disappointing Jesus—seeing how Jesus had already told them once before how he was going to be rejected, abandoned, and killed. Or maybe... maybe they were afraid to ask Jesus to clarify his comments because they were afraid to hear that he expected them to follow in his footsteps... footsteps requiring sacrifice... maybe even suffering. Honestly, we don't know exactly why the disciples were afraid. All Mark says is “they didn't understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

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The next thing we know, Jesus and the disciples were entering a town called Capernaum. Along their way, the disciples had been arguing over which one of them was the greatest. Seriously. The ones who'd already heard Jesus say the first shall be last and the last shall be first were the very ones arguing over which one was the greatest. It's practically comical at this point how obtuse the disciples can be in Mark's gospel.

Jesus asked them, “Hey fellas, what were you all arguing about on the way here.” But once again, the disciples fell silent... afraid to answer. Afraid of being open and honest with Jesus. Afraid of admitting how's they're still more intrigued by this world's definition of greatness than Jesus' definition.

So for the second time in just three short verses, the disciples fell silent. They refused to utter a sound... preferring, instead, the sound of silence.

As if silence doesn't speak? I mean, we all know that, right? How silence can speak volumes?

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- Ask the kids doing something wrong what they're up to... and listen as their silence proclaims their guilt.

- Ask the man why he's refusing to go to the doctor when he's in obvious pain... and listen as his silence proclaims his fear of a diagnosis he doesn't want to hear.
- Ask a preacher what they're preaching on next week... and listen as the silence reveals a lack of preparation.

Silence speaks.

- When you hear a rumor being spread, but rather than squashing the rumor you just ignore it... That silence speaks.
- When you hear someone make a bigoted comment, but rather than standing up for those being put down, you just let the comment pass on by... That silence speaks.
- When a beggar approaches you with a hand out, but you don't even make eye contact, let alone offer a greeting or acknowledge his existence... That silence speaks volumes... That you couldn't care less. That the whole love your neighbor thing somehow doesn't count then and there.
- And when we're confronted with unjust practices of an unjust system that benefit us and hurt others, but we say nothing... When confronted with desperate needs on a communal, national, even global scale but we do nothing... Our silence can be deafening!

I admit it. I know I've fallen silent amid all of those examples and many more—just I suspect the same for you. So let's not kid ourselves. Whether we want it to or not, our silence speaks! And it often speaks much more loudly than we realize!

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Frankly, I think this has been a problem for the mainline church across the past 60 years. And by mainline church, I mean traditional Protestant denominations, including our own.

Now, some of you have heard me talk about this before. How it was about 60 years ago that the Evangelical Church in America really began to grow into a new kind of movement. A movement that, by the 1970's, had become a cultural force that not only emphasized a very literal interpretation of Scripture, but also put a tremendous emphasis on what they called "purity."

Now, their very literal approach to Scripture reading has been attractive to many, as fundamentalism really kind of takes interpretive work out of Scripture reading. "If Paul says wives should submit themselves to their husbands, then clearly, wives should submit themselves to their husbands." This is different from our Reformed approach to Scripture... an approach that seeks to not only explore the words on the page, but the truth found deeper within them... oftentimes only seeable once we remove the layers of historical and literary context that can cloud out the author's real intent. So our tradition has never agreed with the Evangelical tradition's literal approach to Scripture.

But the Evangelical Church's emphasis upon purity... well, that's really what made most mainline Protestants just cringe. We saw the Evangelical tradition turning purity into a judgmental weapon that created boundaries between the faithful... and the unfaithful. "If you behave how we say Scripture says you should behave... then you're good and faithful. But if you behave how we say Scripture says you shouldn't behave... then you're bad and sinful."

And our tradition recoiled. We didn't want to be associated with those fundamentalist evangelicals. When they drew thick lines in the sand along social issues—we wanted nothing to

do with it. We didn't want to be thought of as "holy rollers"—as those who judge others who are different.

And in our fear of being associated with that tradition... we fell silent.

Because we were afraid of seeming evangelical... we fell silent.

And our silence, friends... our silence was deafening!

It was deafening as the Evangelical movement intentionally reached out to spread the love of God to those who didn't know it... and the mainline church... well... didn't. It was deafening when the Evangelical Church took to the airwaves and then to the internet to proclaim their version of the Christian faith... and we (largely) didn't.

For when the mainline Church fell silent... when those with a more progressive theology stopped talking about our understanding of faith... who did the media turn to in order to get the Christian perspective? The only Christians talking—the Evangelicals. Who, God bless them, were doing a tremendous job of spreading their faith and sharing their understanding of God's love in Jesus Christ.

But as they grew... and as evangelism and social conservatism merged... so, too, grew our fear of all things evangelical. And we just grew quieter, and quieter, and quieter until the rest of society began to connect all of Christianity to the Evangelical tradition. And why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't they when the loudest ones talking were folks like Jerry Fallwell, in many ways the predecessor to Franklin Graham.

And we... you and me... the Presbyterian Church... along with our Methodist and Lutheran and Episcopalian brothers and sisters... we grew so afraid of appearing evangelical that we stopped doing evangelism. We just flat out stopped doing it. We stopped sharing our understanding of faith with anyone beyond our own walls. We just acted as if it's perfectly okay to follow Christ, to believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, and yet not ever talk about Jesus with anyone other than the people in our pews.

Well... I'm painting with huge brush strokes here. I may not be talking about you. But I'm talking about us, communally. Us, traditionally. And I'm talking about myself, to be sure.

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I admit, there were times early in my ministry when I was genuinely reluctant, maybe even embarrassed to tell people I was a pastor. Not because I didn't love what I did, but I didn't want others to hear I was a pastor and then take one step back... assuming I'm judgmental... as someone they had to walk on eggshells around, lest I condemn them.

I can even recall, and I cringe when I think of it, but I recall a sermon I gave in my early preaching years called "Evangelism 101." The point I made—which I utterly disagree with today—was that we can share God's love solely by our actions. As if we don't need to use our words to spread faith. Again, I cringe at that now. I wish I could go back and ask my old self how in the world I thought people who don't yet know of God's love for them would ever uncover the story of God's for them, if we don't actually use our mouths to tell the story. By osmosis?

I also recall the time when, at another church I served, the Evangelism Committee came to a Session meeting with the recommendation that the church change the name of their committee. They no longer wanted to be called the Evangelism Committee, but the Discipleship Committee. You see, they were having trouble getting people to serve on their committee, because everybody was afraid of that word, they said. “Evangelism.” A word that most literally means “Good News.” A word that, in all actuality, simply means sharing the story of God’s love for another. And yet, because of all that surrounds the evangelical movement, people associate the mere word “evangelism” with proselytizing, door-knocking, soul-saving, and judgment. And the church agreed. So they changed the name of the committee. And that said something.

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As I’ve shared in a couple places recently, this discussion on evangelism simply has to be held, friends. And thankfully, we’re beginning to have it. As you may have heard, Session has made evangelism one of our key priorities moving forward this year. They’re exploring forming a new Evangelism team, even if *we’re* not quite sure what to call it.

So we have to face our fear of this word, friends, and all we associate with it. Just as we have to stop pretending that our silence surrounding evangelism isn’t already saying a heck of alot. Because it is.

It says something that we, TPC, don’t already have an Evangelism team, or any committee in this church whose sole responsibility is to go out and build relationships with folks beyond our walls.

Just as it says something that, by far and away, the number one response Session received amid their recent interviews with membership is that this church wants to grow—both quantitatively and qualitatively—but mostly, quantitatively. This church remembers what it was like 60 years ago when we were double our size. There’s an institutional memory... an institutional nostalgia for that. We want to grow.

And yet, we, as a church, aren’t comfortable, sometimes not even willing, to talk about our faith beyond ourselves.

Do we see the dissonance here? We want to grow, but we don’t want to talk about our faith with others?

But friends, doesn’t our world desperately need to hear how we understand God’s love?

Doesn’t our community need to hear, despite what others may have told them, that the Church isn’t a place of judgment or exclusion, but a place of welcome and acceptance, regardless of where you come from or what you’ve done?

Doesn’t the addict need to hear that he’s loved?

Doesn’t the queer teen need to hear that she’s beautiful and perfect just as God made her?

Don’t the homeless and hungry need to hear that money is no measure of their worth, for God’s already proclaimed them as precious?

Doesn’t the abused woman need to hear that nothing she did warranted her abuse and God doesn’t want her staying in such a relationship?

Doesn’t our society need to hear that God’s will isn’t exclusion, but inclusion of all.

Doesn't our nation need to hear that dividing walls have no place in God's kingdom?

Doesn't our violent and judgmental world need to hear that Jesus Christ himself was a refugee, born of unwed teenage mother, who grew up to speak truth to power as he called his disciples to live simply, live generously, live compassionately, live justly?

I mean...

Doesn't the woman wrestling with her faith, struggling with deep doubt, need to hear that doubt is a part of faith, and it's okay to ask questions and be unsure?

Doesn't the dying old man need to know that there was nothing he could've ever done that did or will separate him from God?

Don't our insecure neighbors filled with needs and question and pains need to know there's a community here who will love them and embrace them, no questions asked.

Don't people need to know that the church isn't into saving people's soul—God's already done that. We just want to love people, and help people uncover God's love for them.

For we believe, friends, we believe life changes when you uncover this foundational truth. We believe life changes when you uncover the love and grace God has for you.

So let me be clear, the word "evangelism" is not the same thing as the Evangelical Church or the Evangelical movement.

Evangelism is not about saving souls. Nor is about growing the church.

Rather, evangelism, at its heart, is about sharing wonderfully good news... it's about sharing our experience of the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ.

So friends, I implore us... it's time start telling our stories. It's time to start proclaiming our faith with our mouths again. Our beautiful, inclusive, life-changing faith in our beautiful, inclusive, life-changing Savior. So let our proclamations be bold... Let them be full of love... and let them flow from our mouths as we refuse to let silence speak for us anymore. Amen.