

Don't Just Do Something, Sit There (Luke 6.43-45)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
August 16, 2009

This morning's sermon is on silence, which I realize is oxymoronic. Actually, I knew this at the beginning of the week, when I first began to consider the spiritual practice of sitting in silence and smiled at how silly it would be to try and put that into words. But somewhere along the way, I sort of lost my place, reverted to my regular form and developed a clever twenty minute sermon that began with my own silent experiences, sketched a brief history of Christian contemplation, drew some lessons from Buddhism, and then returned to our text and its rabbi before closing with a final set of questions. The sermon contained footnotes from no less than nine sources, including a couple of highbrow neurological studies, and, only after reading all week, outlining my thoughts, and finally sitting down to write them did I realize that it was all wrong. For what could be funnier than a preacher drowning out all silence with an abundance of words on the subject? And what could be more necessary from a sermon on silence than the actual experience of silence itself? With this in mind, I scrapped the sermon and started over. What I'd like to offer in its stead are three introductions to three different periods of silence: a one-minute period, a two-minute period, and, finally a three-minute period of silent reflection. Now I've already said a lot and we've got some silence to get to so let's begin.

Reflection One: The Awkward Silence – I was introduced to the practice of sitting in silence by a seminary professor who taught the history of Christian spirituality. I met him the first week of my first year, as did the entire incoming class, and his reputation preceded him. He had studied everywhere from the colleges of Oxford to the Gregorium

in Rome, but had spent much of his life in Kentucky, where he had been befriended by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. We had heard ministers and professors rave about this man and so we could hardly wait to get into his class and soak in the wisdom of his decades of experience, you know, bathe in the aura of a bright old soul. And I'll never forget what he did on that first day of class. He welcomed us all to the course, and without any real explanation at all, invited us to sit for a period of silence. He took his seat, folded his hands, lowered his eyes, and was still.

The silence, of course, was meant to put us in touch not with our teacher's wisdom, but with our own, though it took some doing at first. At first, I recall feeling vaguely frustrated with the exercise. *I got up early for this? I was already having silence...in bed. This is stupid. How much have I paid this guy to sit there and do nothing? I wonder if there's a point to this. Do you suppose there's a point to this? I wonder what everybody else is thinking. How long is this going to go on?* And while my monkey mind jumped from thought to thought, gradually calming down, settling on one question or two, the old professor sat like a stone guru, teaching us about silence with silence itself. It was terribly uncomfortable.

Over time we came to expect that our professor would begin every session with silence, which he did. But over time we also came to find that the silence began to whiz by, five full minutes felt like a snap of the fingers. The silence got us in touch with where we were each day, physically and spiritually, how worried our minds were and how busy our lives felt at a single given moment on the journey. And, at least in my circle of classmates, every one of us overcame some initial skepticism to embrace the silence as a grounding practice. The silence woke us to the day and prepared us to do

good work. Some of us even came to depend on it and got grumpy when other classes began at the stroke of the hour with words fired at us like bullets from a belt.

So I would like to invite you into a one-minute period of silence. I would like to leave it as unguided and awkward as my professor once did. All you need to do is make yourself comfortable. Adjust yourself in your chair. Make sure your feet are on the ground. Place your hands in a comfortable position. Lower your gaze or close your eyes. And in the silence simply observe what you observe. Join me now in silence.

[*One minute of silence.*]

At the end of a period of silence, my professor used to ask in a tone of raspy benevolence, “May I recall you from silence?” So may I recall you from silence? Take a moment to rejoin the world of words as I introduce our second period of silence.

Reflection Two: The Silent Image – Sitting in silence is most often associated with Asian religious traditions, including particularly Buddhism, and when we sit in silence we might feel a certain kinship with meditators of many faiths and cultures. Indeed, the title of this sermon is nothing more than an old Zen joke, the playful turn of a phrase that invites hearers into the practice of mindful sitting. But we might also note that there is a very long history of meditation within the Christian tradition. From Greek orthodox contemplatives like Saint Symeon, who taught calming of the mind through meditation, to Spanish monastics like John of the Cross, who taught union with the divine through deep breathing, Christianity has been threaded through with its own strands of contemplatives, mystics, and meditators.¹ So it is helpful to remember that when we sit

¹ B. Alan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 44-46.

in silence, we are expressing a kind of kinship with people of other faiths and people of our own faith. As it happens, we may also be expressing an affinity with science as researchers continue to find evidence that meditative practices contribute to lowering emotional stress, heightening activity in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, and increasing attention and awareness while decreasing anxiety.² Perhaps most importantly, there are now a number of data points to support the idea that people who meditate may simply train themselves over time to be a bit less reactive and a bit more calm, holding knee-jerk reactions in check for perhaps a few seconds longer than others.³ In short, sitting in silent meditation may actually make us feel better, whether we are Buddhists, Baptists, or biologists. But since we happen to be Baptists, it seems appropriate that our second period of silence take on the character of that tradition.

Perhaps more than anything else, Baptists have stood for the freedom of every individual to interpret our sacred stories in the light of his or her conscience. At the heart of those stories lie the narratives of Rabbi Jesus, the words passed down to us about his life and teachings. And they are *words*. We read from Bibles that are densely packed with words, hundreds of pages of them in tiny print and sometimes archaic translations. But from all of the words we might also draw certain images. And one of the oldest meditative practices is simply to take an image and focus our minds upon it. When we do this, we find that the words are constantly trying to creep back in. Even so, we are

² Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 149-181.

³ Wallace, *Mind in the Balance*, 34.

encouraged to hear the words, to let them pass, and then return to the simple image, the visual that we are holding in our minds.

So as we prepare for our second period of silence, I invite you to produce in your mind an image of Rabbi Jesus. Do your best not to hear his voice or think of his words. Just freeze him in a silent frame. Perhaps you will picture him standing with the woman at the well. Perhaps you will picture him gathering the children to himself. Perhaps you will picture him sitting at the table breaking bread or washing someone's feet or sleeping or laughing. Just picture the rabbi in a way that you find meaningful and try to hold that image. I invite you now into a time of silence.

[Two minutes of silence.]

May I recall you from silence? As you again reenter the world of words, perhaps still holding the image of our rabbi in your minds, I would like to read you his teachings from today's lectionary text. Consider how they might relate to meditation.

Reflection Three: The Seeds of Silence – “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”⁴ This is a beautiful teaching of Jesus, and, if at first blush it sounds dualistic with the language of good and evil, then a meditative look might help us with that. For one of the most complicated gifts that sitting in silence has to give is the slow realization, as we look within, that we possess the seeds of both good and evil. We are neither one nor the other, but simply people who are capable of creating both. We sit

⁴ Luke 6.43-45, New Revised Standard Version.

in silence in order to learn more about who and where we are. The silence brings us painful memories and happy ones. It shows us our wounds and our wonders. It reminds us, as we observe our minds, that actions spring from the mind. Before the action is the thought. Before the word is the silence. Before the fruit is the seed. So we look within in the hopes that we will nourish the seeds of what is best in us, the seeds of love, compassion, peace, and understanding. And we look within to honor and somehow hold in check the seeds of hurt, anger, ignorance, and violence. All of these seeds are within us, but the rabbi invites those of us who aspire to live good lives to tend the seeds of our best ideas that they might develop into roots and blossom into practices. Biblical scholar Alan Culpepper puts it well. In this teaching of Jesus, the rabbi is encouraging “a consistency between who one is and what one does, the inner and the outer, the invisible and the visible.”⁵ With this in mind, we come to a final period of silence.

I invite you into this period of silence with an ancient meditative technique common to all of the world’s major religious traditions. When I stop talking, I invite you simply to breathe. Take the deepest breath you can, drawing it in through your nose and holding it comfortably before exhaling through your mouth. Then repeat the process. Again, make yourself comfortable by placing your feet on the floor, folding your hands into an easy position, lowering your gaze or closing your eyes. And simply breathe. Focus on the in breath. Then the out breath. Ground yourself in the present moment, the here and now. And know that you possess all that you need. The seeds of a good life lie within you. So with every in breath, draw in love, compassion, peace, and understanding. And

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, “Commentary on Luke 6.29-49,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 151.

with every out breath, let go of hurt, anger, ignorance, and violence. Breathing in, you nourish the seeds of love. Breathing out, you let the rest go. I invite you now into a final period of silence. Breathing in, breathing out.

[Three minutes of silence followed by the striking of a singing bowl.]