

The Gift of Silence

– By Rev. Jake Kim Given at Fanwood Presbyterian Church

Good morning, it is an honor to be able to share God's word with God's people at Fanwood Presbyterian Church. When I look out at you this morning, I see the immense love of Jesus Christ wrapping his arms around you as you seek to be his faithful people in the community of Fanwood, New Jersey.

This morning, I would like to begin with an experiment. Think back on your history as a talker. Have you ever said something that you came to regret? That as soon as you said it, you regretted it as it came out of your mouth- it wasn't wisdom, but folly. **But you felt you couldn't help yourself.** When you experience spiritual turrets syndrome that is an indicator that our souls are out of alignment.

My family is in the process of moving from New Jersey to Southern California. And we have to decide what we are going to keep and what we are going to get rid of. As we begin, my mind wanders the stuff my wife, purchased that I feel, that she over paid for that she is trying to sell. I know that I should remain silent. Let ... the moment pass. But, my tongue has a mind of its own. An in my fatigue and irritation, I make a totally unnecessary observation. And you know, if it wasn't for my wife Yuni being my better half ignoring my comments, that evening could have been completely ruined.

I hear the soundtrack to the Gambler
You've got to know when to hold 'em
Know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away
Know when to run

When we find ourselves consistently saying, outrageous and unwise or angry things, it often a sign that our souls out of tune with Jesus.

In the Message translation of the book of James it says, "It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell. This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. ⁹With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image.

Whether the issues at hand is the Supreme Court's ruling on gay marriage, or the Presidential stump speeches of The Donald generalizing Mexican immigrants

as “rapists and drug smugglers”, or the battle over the removal of the Confederate battle flag from government buildings, there is a no shortage of opportunities for debates to turn angry, disrespectful, and even violent. Even amongst faithful Christians, if we do not faithfully submit ourselves to Jesus before engaging in these conversations, we can find ourselves going up in flames sniping about today’s hot button issues.

God wants the Church to be engaged the work of living and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that heals bodies and souls, that seeks racial and societal reconciliation, and to be apart of building up our families and neighbors. In order to do this, we need to spend time with God discerning, what things should and shouldn’t come out of our mouths, and to accomplish this we need to take time away from the noise, activities, and messages that we allow to pollute our lives. Through the practice of the spiritual discipline of silence – God can empower us by showing us where in our lives we need growth, and empower to make those changes.

One way to practice the discipline of silence is to invite Jesus to guide what comes out of our mouths. Meaning that we invite Jesus to bless us with knowing when to press the mute button for our mouths.

The Bible says, "It is not what goes into a person that defiles him, but what comes out of it."

Many of us have already admitted, our tongues can get us into trouble. And this can often happen because of unresolved issues in our lives, and for the priest Zechariah this was his issue.

In Luke chapter 1, we encounter the temple priest Zechariah who was performing his priestly duties in the Holy of Holies, until the angel Gabriel appears. Gabriel, tells Zechariah, that God has heard his and Elizabeth's prayers, and that she will be having a baby boy. You would think, if an angel of God appeared to you, and definitely if you are a veteran priest of the Jerusalem Temple like Zechariah, the response would have been silent awe, and gratefulness. Instead, Zechariah's reply is disbelief. "My wife and I are old." There are a million and one reasons why we can't have a baby.

Church, can we relate to Zechariah? He is a believer in the God of Israel, but his soul, on various levels seems to have been doubts and wounds. Some of his doubts stem around the fact that he and his wife were unable to have children, and for years it was a stigma on his life. Many of us live in this tension of things that we have prayed for intensely, and after a period of time, we realize that we did not get what we were hoping for. We may even get mad at God, and we can take it out on the people around us.

It is interesting to contrast, how Luke lifts up young Mary, the mother of Jesus, as her response to Gabriel's announcements, is humble in the acceptance of this news. As her response to God's announcement was awe and obedience. The angel Gabriel's response to Zechariah's babbling and rationalizing was to strike him with the gift of deafness and muteness. Hear no evil, speak no evil. At first glance it may seem like a Zechariah was being punished, if you look at this incident with spiritual eyes you see a blessing. Zechariah was blessed with the gift of silence. Specifically ... He was blessed with the mute button of Silence from being able to talk his way into trouble. By in my youth ministry days, I would attend graduations and sit with the family of the graduate to be. One time, we sat near a mom, who couldn't stop talking, first she would brag about her daughter and family, and then she would start bad mouthing everyone else, and she had an opinion for everything. Everyone was leaning away from her. She needed to be vaccinated with a phonograph needle. Her graduating daughter came by, and after five minutes she couldn't handle it and excused herself. Until about an hour later, her 7 year old son, blurted, Mom, you need a button for your mouth. And there was silence, and you could hear everyone sigh the Hallelujah chorus. Zechariah the priest was given a mute button for his mouth, and it gave him the opportunity to mature in this walk with God and others. He would be no longer able to manipulate his environment, and the opinions of others with his words. He couldn't boast, or name drop to cover his insecurities, "Hey, I am a high priest in the Temple you know, and I know a thing or two." He couldn't say to Elizabeth at the restaurant, "I wasn't hitting on the waitress, I just making small talk." He couldn't manipulate his environment with his words. He had to learn to hear and obey God's voice. Perhaps, the Lord, was preventing Zechariah from saying something the he would really regret later." Elizabeth honey, I am not really sure that baby is ...(mine)." But arguing with the Angel Gabriel, Zechariah was trying to maintain control of his understanding of reality. In organizational systems theory, whoever has the most power will talk more. Being silent before another is an act of humility or submission. Our words and our need to talk is a reflection of our hearts. We cannot control our tongues by just trying hard. Zechariah needed the help of God to learn to keep his mouth shut and know when to speak.

2. An important aspect of practicing, the spiritual discipline of silence in our lives is to remove yourself or remove the things that distract your ability to hear the voice/direction of Jesus in your life. Practicing the removal of noise and distractions throughout your day is the quickest way to re-centering your soul. When we are feeling unsettled in our souls, it could be God, simply telling us to do less, and focus more on trusting Jesus.

Many of us face varying levels of stress throughout the day, at work, at home, at school, and it is important to pull your self away from it, throughout the day. To remember what is important to you and God, what is important to you and your

family. Even if it is a one to 5 minute break, to close your eyes, and to come before God, that may be enough to center you.

For Zechariah, it was going to take more than a quick break to change his ways. Angel struck Zechariah, not only with a mute button for his mouth, but he was unable to hear. Luke said that people communicated with him by making hand signals.

Zechariah - He was given the gift of silence, in the form of being sensory deprived. As a priest Zechariah's mind would have turned to scripture passages, like Be Still An Know that I am God. The Lord is in his Holy Temple and let all the earth keep silent.

Being struck mute and deaf by God's Zechariah would have realized after the initial shock wore off, that God was getting his attention, and telling to stop over thinking everything. I am going to use you to become the father late in your life, and your child will come to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Time to reign in your thoughts and to focus on what I am doing in your life.

For many of us today, being struck with sensory deprivation would be a hard pill to swallow. With so much media options, along with their advertisements tempting us to buy their product or lifestyle we might have subconsciously allowed our souls to adopt or crave things that steal our peace. Un-Christ-like values and attitudes that can make us crazy with desires that can make us impatient and short tempered, or jealous.

Experts tell us that our mental muscles around guiding our thoughts has become very weak. That is why we fill our days with music, television, and videos, because they can guide and occupy our minds. We don't like silence, because our un-directed thoughts, can lead to anxiety, boredom, and anger.

We live in a world that doesn't allow us to be alone with our thoughts. In the ancient world there was a lot more silence, and it made it easier to focus on listening for God's voice.

What do you think about? When you don't have any outside stimulation?

I have found myself, after a long day of work and crying babies, I find myself drawn to the couch. And then I am drawn to the On Demand button, and waste my time, watching train wreck, television shows, and pretty much every show is a train wreck.

And when the story is running slow, I find myself multi-tasking on my smartphone. And then I start feeling guilty because I know that to refresh for the challenges of the next day. And then you don't get to sleep on time. And then you being feeling guilty.

Our soul's left untended can easily get superficial and ungrounded away from God. Gotta achieve this, gotta resent this, gotta buy this. This is why it is so important to find ways to be silent before Jesus and regularly get connected to the perspective of eternity with God that we can only encounter in silence before God. God is saying, this sound of silence that you hear is eternity. God's purposes become clearer to Zechariah as he replays his time with God in the Temple.

Have any of you ever practiced intentionally keeping silent for a day or a season? It can be quite liberating. It can free you up from having to be defensive; you listen to what your clients are actually telling you, and you can have fewer misunderstandings with the people you care about.

Lucky for us, today we have the option to practice silence in our lives, as a spiritual discipline that can connect us to Jesus Christ, any place and any time and under any circumstances. We can partake in the redemptive work of Jesus, of letting Jesus redeem our speech and re-tune our hearts.

For Zechariah, God imposed silence to get his attention and prompt his grown as a leader, husband and future father. But for Jesus, the practice of silence was a foundational part of this ministry.

Jesus brings salvation to this world as much by what he doesn't say, as by what he did say.

Jesus' application of the discipline of silence, of placing what he did and didn't say in the purposes of his Heavenly Father, was prophetically described in Isaiah 53 years before the coming of Jesus Christ.

ISAIAH 53

But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own.

Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word.

He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.

The Suffering Servant, the Messiah, would come and be beaten and abused in order to show the world the sacrificial love of God the Father. A Father, who would send his only begotten Son to take away the sins, the hatred, and the wounds from the people of the world.

In the Matthew passage, we see that Jesus was given many opportunities to save his mortal life, by recanting that he was the Son God, the Messiah. Now Jesus was standing before Pilate, the Roman governor. "Are you the king of the Jews?" the governor asked him. Jesus replied, "You have said it." But when the leading priests and the elders made their accusations against him, Jesus remained silent. "Don't you hear all these charges they are bringing against you?" Pilate

demanded. But Jesus made no response to any of the charges, much to the governor's surprise.

How the world would have been different, if Jesus was not crucified on the cross, as the Lamb of God? But, Jesus' disciplined responses; reveal to us that, to change the world today, as in Jesus' day, is not to involuntarily react in anger and vitrol, but to give the response that the Holy Spirit has given.

We saw this spiritual dynamic change the hearts of lawmakers and corporate sponsors alike to see the church, the Black church, respond to Dylann Roof's racially motivated violent shooting of a Bible Study at an African-American church in South Carolina. There was deep sadness, and recollection of deep racial wounds of the past, and of churches burned and bombed in the South, the response could have been violent and angry, but instead it became an opportunity for the followers of Christ to ask for the removal of the historically loaded Confederate Battle Flag from South Carolina's state capital. This is an example of the soul force of people connected to Jesus, responding with the grace and love of Jesus, changing the hearts and minds of the community they live in.

When, I think about the silence of Jesus, I fall in love with Him as a spiritual leader. Having been the Director of Alpha Northern California, and the Director of Alumni Relations of Princeton Theological Seminary, I have had the opportunity to work with many pastors and congregations. And I realize that as a pastor, Jesus could have been the pastor of a mega church, he could have lead a comfortable life of prestige, and if he had gotten into tele-evangelism Jesus could have made a ton of money. But, I love him, because, I know that Jesus as the Son of God could have gone the way of power religion, but he chose not to in his day.

Jesus' could have avoided the Cross, but he didn't.

Jesus is silent before chief priest.

Jesus is silent before the crowd. Jesus is silent before Herod. Jesus is silent before Pilate. When Jesus is tested for 40 days by Satan in the wilderness, he refused to say the words that would give him power, wealth in favor of being faithful to God.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, when Elijah and Moses appear, Jesus warns his disciples, not to tell anybody about it until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

At the last supper, when Peter rebukes Jesus for talking about being killed as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Jesus silences Peter, saying, Don't say such things. Get thee behind me Satan. Silence is Jesus' great struggle.

On the Cross, on of the criminals pointed out that Jesus could say the word and be brought down from the cross. But as we know there would have been no redemption, no salvation, and when one word could save him and crush us, we realize that the words of Jesus was empowered by Holy Spirit, and it would change billions of lives ever since.

In the end we are saved by the word that Jesus did not say.

Jesus gained the spiritual authority, wisdom, and strength to perform miracles, to preach to thousands, to pray for the healing, through the time he spend with God. Jesus started his ministry by withdrawing to the wilderness to be tested for 40 days and nights. Every morning according to Mark, he withdrew to a silent place. After he fed

5,000 he withdrew to a silent place. When he heard the news of Zechariah's son, John the Baptist's beheading, he withdrew to a silent place. Jesus, the man, before he became the Resurrected Christ, felt pain, temptation, and sorrow. He was spiritually aware enough to know, when need to process the insanity that is often humanity, with his Heavenly Father. He need to plug into his power source.

We began our talk this morning, being reminded that when our souls are out of tune with God, often the first symptom is found in what and how we say things, how we treat the people closes to us. Either they are life-giving words, or they might be argumentative or boastful words. On a societal scale, the local church, when working together, to entrust their words and manners to Jesus Christ, can become the balm that brings healing, reconciliation in families, cities, and even nations.

God wants the Church to be engaged in the work of healing body and souls, of racial and societal reconciliation, and to be apart of building up our families and neighbors. In order to do this, but to accomplish this not in our power but in God's power, we need to spend time with God discerning. As James pointed out, left to our own devices, we have a hard time, controlling what things should and shouldn't come out of our mouths. But, through the practice of the spiritual discipline of silence – God can empower us by showing us where in our lives we need growth, and empower to make those changes.

And so I want to invite you this week to make a decision to examine your words and hear what it says about the condition of your soul. Take time out throughout the week, one minute, to two minutes at a time at first silently before God, and invite Jesus to still and calm your soul, so you can hear his voice.

I want to close with this story, about a young Richard Foster when he was pastoring a small Quaker church in California. And he was getting worked up, as recounted how the Israelites wandered the deserter for 40 years to learn the spiritual lessons to prepare to enter the Promise Land. And from the choir loft philosophy professor Dallas Willard shouted out, I doubt!. Professor Willard was point out that if it took 40 years under the leadership of Moses, we shouldn't be so presumptuous that it might take any congregation a lot of trial and error to grow in to spiritual maturity.

So, as you remember to implement the practice of silence into your life, remember to be gentle with yourself and be kind to one another, as you seek to be a healing and reconciling presence for those struggling around you. Pause before you speak, and in that moment of Silence invite Jesus to build his Kingdom through your words.