

It is not always easy to know when it is a time for silence or a time for speaking.

In Ecclesiastes we hear, *“there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak”*.

A more modern variation that you may have heard is, *“If you don’t have anything good to say about someone, then don’t say anything at all.”*

There are many occasions when it is appropriate to speak:

- When we want to express an opinion on an important issue.
- When we want to take part in a social conversation or when we want to offer sympathy or encouragement, or understanding to another.

But, there are also times to keep silent:

- When we really don’t know what we are talking about or what to say about an issue.
- When it’s best to just cool off and not spout out something ugly.
- When we confront a mystery that we can’t seem to wrap our mind around.
- When there is such pain that any word is shallow and all we can do is offer a loving non-anxious presence.

Sometimes we try to dominate a situation when we should be more open to the views and needs of others; sometimes we are silent when we should speak out in opposition to injustice or evil; sometimes we hesitate when we could offer a word of comfort or support.

As our Gospel read describes the interaction between Jesus and the disciples it is indicated that twice the disciples were silent when they heard what Jesus was saying.

Silence #1 comes after Jesus again tells his disciples that he is going to be betrayed and killed.

Verse 32: *“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”*

Why did the disciples not ask him to explain that further?? Maybe they simply did not want to believe that Jesus did mean what they were hearing. There are times when we are silent because we do not want to hear what we fear we might hear. It is easier to keep quiet, to pretend that we do not understand, than to ask and hear something we might not like.

Silence #2 comes after Jesus asks the disciples what they have been arguing about. This time they seem to keep quiet because they are ashamed to answer. *“But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”*

This prompts us all to think about how often WE might be silent if Jesus were to confront us and ask what WE have been talking and fretting about—especially if we spend a lot of time worrying about our status or station in life. We just might fall silent if we were asked to explain how what we are doing and saying fits in with the way of life that Jesus sets before us.

It must have been difficult for the disciples when they realized that even IF they were silent, Jesus somehow knew what they were talking about. Kind of the same idea when we retreat into silence, even when we know that our very lives are open before God.

Jesus proceeds to speak a word to them...and to US! *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* He then illustrates what he is talking about as he takes a child, puts his arms around the child, and declares that in welcoming the weak and the helpless they will be welcoming God.

Now, we might be tempted to dwell in that image of Jesus cuddling a sweet child...and who can resist that? Right! But scholars tell us that the Greek words for *“child”* and *“servant”* have the same root...that they are closely related. The audience in that time would have heard the word *“child”* as referring to someone like the servant who served meals to everyone else in the household. The person who was *“servant of all”* was the lowest in rank of all the servants—the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill. So, both child and servant were seen as without honor or high social standing. A child did not contribute much to the economic value of a household or community, and a child could not be anything to enhance one’s position in the struggle for prestige or influence. Children and servants were of equally low social status in that culture.

Children were not the only ones in that culture who were devalued. Megan McKenna gives us a long list of such folks who didn’t seem to count.

Folks who were *“old, handicapped, sick, illiterate, cast out as unclean. This group included peasants, farmers, shepherds, widows, slaves, the unemployed, aliens, immigrants, prisoners, and the homeless.”*

Seems like things haven't changed a whole lot as we think about how many of those folks still don't seem to count in our own society. Peter Marty says that Jesus up-ends the flow chart of power and puts children at the very top. Marty makes the sort of provocative claim that Jesus is fine with “rank”, just as long as that system of ranking has been totally reversed—with the lowest at the top, the high and mighty brought low, with the first being last, and the last being first. As always, when Jesus talks about the reign of God, he reverses a whole bunch of our personal expectations and assumptions.

And while we might think that things have dramatically improved since those long ago days when children were devalued, we are reminded of children today whose lives and well-being have not been put at the top of our priority list. Sure—in our own families and within this faith community we may love and cherish our children—but what about the others in our country and in the wider world??

Barbara Brown Taylor has this to say about our Gospel read:

*“Do we see what Jesus is up to here?? It is one more of his lessons in the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, where the first will be last and the last shall be first, and everyone who thinks he or she is on top of the heap is in for a big surprise. He is not just talking about children, either. He is talking about all the little ones in this world with no status, no influence, no income. He is daring us to welcome the powerless as bearers of God, to believe that God's hierarchy might be the reverse of ours and that greatness is only available to those with no ambition to be great.”*

However we might choose to organize our individual lives, we have this little child to remind us—that God just might organize these things differently. That if we want to welcome the God of love into our lives, then there is no one whom we can safely ignore.

*“No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here at St. Paul's United Church of Christ.”*

Thanks be to God!

