



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“The Silent Treatment”

Ecclesiastes 3

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Silence is a powerful thing.

After the February 2019 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, student Emma Gonzalez gave two speeches that went viral. The first was a tearful, impassioned eulogy of her classmates who died in the shooting; the second was what she didn't say in a speech at the March for Our Lives rally in Washington, D.C. a month later. In the middle of her six-minute speech, she went silent...for four minutes and twenty-six seconds. During that long silence, she stood there. Several tears fell. She did not wipe them away. That's Emma on your bulletin cover. Her silence was uncomfortable. It was powerful. When she broke her silence, she explained that four minutes and twenty-six seconds was how long it took for her seventeen classmates to be killed. Her silence spoke volumes.

Silence is a powerful thing.

Actors master the pregnant pause. Musicians learn to value the silence between the notes. As jazz great Dizzy Gillespie once said, “It's taken me most of my life to know which notes *not* to play.”¹

Silence is a powerful thing.

In relationships, silence can reflect comfort and security. The people who know and love us best are often the ones with whom we can be silent, without feeling uncomfortable.

Silence is a powerful thing.

One of my favorite television advertisements is one for a phone company. It shows a teenage girl using her cell phone to call a teenage boy. The boy answers.

Hello.

Hello. Todd, just calling to let you know that I'm giving you the silent treatment.

Jen, so, you are calling to tell me that you are giving me the silent treatment. This is like the eighth time you have called me today.

It's fine. My family has free unlimited mobile-to-mobile minutes. I can call all I want.

Jen, I don't think you understand how the silent treatment works.

¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerryweissman/2018/03/26/emma-gonzalez-sound-of-silence/#2a93b85d60b8>

(There is silence on the other end of the line.)

Hello? Jen?²

Oh, Jen understands how the silent treatment works.

Silence is a powerful thing.

Silence can be a weapon, something that we use to hurt and control other people. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. graduated from West Point Academy in 1936, one of the first black men to do so. When he went through the Academy, not one cadet would speak to him, sit with him, eat with him, room with him. For four long years, the only voices he heard were the voices of his instructors. Davis went on to be the commander of the Tuskegee Airmen, and was the first African American General in the U.S. Army.³

Silence is a powerful thing.

Our voice can be silenced by prejudice, sexism, intimidation. Silence can overwhelm us after a loved one dies, robbing us of the person with whom we made daily conversation. Silence can create distance, as we wait for communication from someone we haven't heard from in years, unsure how to break the silence between us.⁴

Silence is a powerful thing.

Silence can be a good thing, a healing thing. Literally. Recent studies have shown that quiet can decrease stress levels and lower blood pressure and heart rate; another showed that silence helped mice regenerate brain cells in their hippocampus.⁵

Silence is a powerful thing.

Perhaps no one better understood the power of silence in communication than Martin Luther King, Jr. did. He was the master of the slow cadence and the thoughtful pause. But he also knew the limits and dangers of silence. He said:

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.⁶

Silence can be taken too far. Take experimental composer John Cage and his work *4'33"*. It was composed in 1952, for any instrument or combination of instruments, and the score instructs the performers not to play their instruments during the entire duration of the piece throughout the three movements.

Silence is a powerful thing.

How do you feel about silence? Do you avoid it? Do you have too much of it? Do you long for more of it in your life? Many of us do. For good reason.

² <https://vimeo.com/56471573>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1991/02/04/the-long-lonely-flight-of-gen-benjamin-davis/3610bb8b-4295-45a8-94a2-c72881488b33/>

⁴ I am indebted to a sermon "Silent Treatment" preached by Amy Starr Redwine, December 8, 2019 at First Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia.

⁵ <https://www.outsideonline.com/2397949/quiet-parks-international-gordon-hempton>

⁶ Multiple internet sources.

A study, conducted by researchers at the University of California-San Diego concludes that people are every day inundated with the equivalent amount of 34 gigabytes of information. Through cell phones, the internet, email, television, radio, newspapers, books, social media, etc., people receive every day about 105,000 words or 23 words per second during waking hours. Although people cannot actually read 105,000 words each day, this is the real number estimated to be reaching the human eyes and ears every day.⁷ That's a lot of words coming our way.

And, then there are our own words.

Richard Foster, who has written about spiritual disciplines, writes this about the danger of words:

A frantic stream of words flows from us in an attempt to straighten others out. We want so desperately for them to agree with us, to see things our way. We evaluate people, judge people, condemn people. We devour people with our words.⁸

In such a world, silence is a rare and valued commodity. Gordon Hempton is an audio ecologist. He's a global explorer and collector of natural sound. He's recorded the soundscapes of prairies, shorelines, mountains, and forests around the world. In recent years, he's also become what he calls a silence activist. He defines silence not as an absence but a presence. A quiet place, he says, is "the think tank of the soul."

But silence, he claims, is on the verge of extinction. Places in nature that never have any noise pollution are already gone. The main culprit is noise from airplanes and automobiles. Air traffic has tripled since the 1980s, and the number of cars worldwide, already over a billion, is expected to reach two billion by 2030. Hempton estimates that there are now fewer than ten places in the U.S. where natural noise can be heard uninterrupted by human made noise for longer than 15-minute intervals.⁹

Silence is on the verge of extinction.

But maybe that's a good thing. Silence can be frightening. When we stop moving, when we stop chattering, when we no longer hear the voices of others, we run smack into the truth of our lives. Silence reminds us of what we have not resolved within ourselves. Silence shows us what we have yet to become. Silence reminds us of our deep need for God. Silence has so much to teach us.

In the next few weeks, we will be exploring different aspects of silence. For now, for today, I invite you to embrace silence, walk towards it, to experience more of it in order to discover its gifts.

One of those gifts is listening. Silence creates room, space for listening.

I am convinced that our world is in desperate need of better listeners. People willing to listen with undivided attention and whole hearts. To listen without trying to figure out what they are going to say in response.

I imagine each of us has at least one person in our lives or in the world on whom we might like to impose silence so that they would learn how to listen better. On the flip side, each one of us surely has someone in our lives who wishes we were better listeners.¹⁰

⁷ <https://www.tech21century.com/the-human-brain-is-loaded-daily-with-34-gb-of-information/>

⁸ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*.

⁹ <https://www.outsideonline.com/2397949/quiet-parks-international-gordon-hempton>

¹⁰ "Silent Treatment," a sermon preached by Amy Starr Redwine, December 8, 2019 at First Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia.

What if we stopped devouring people with our words, our opinions, our agendas? What might we learn about our family and friends? Our neighbors? Our community? The pain of the world? In silence, day after day, what might we learn about God?

One of the oldest and most persistent claims of the people of God is that silence is holy. One of the most powerful ways we experience God is in silence. That belief has produced monks and contemplatives and the deep traditions of monasticism and mysticism. In recent years, meditation has emerged as a popular and effective means of accessing the gifts of silence.

Cultivating silence doesn't mean we have to stop talking altogether. This morning's text reminds us that there is a time to be silent and a time to speak. But we can talk less. Post less. Text less. We can turn off the music or the television show or the podcast.

We can listen without judging or problem solving, just listen to the people we love, to the people God loves. And we can listen for God, by finding just a few minutes each day to pray, to meditate, to walk, to be silent.

Because silence is a powerful thing, and if we take time for it, who knows what — or who — we might hear.

Amen.