



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Soulful Silence" - How to Pray Sermon Series

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I grew up in what I consider to be the heart of the rock and roll era. Born in 1960 I grew up blowing my ears out through the 70's. But there is one band I cannot stand from the 70s— and that band is "Boston".

The reason why I have a strong distaste for them is because of my roommate in college. He was the kind of guy who could not sleep without playing loud rock music to soothe him. This was before the era of headphones so he would just play his music on a small boom box. Most often he would blast "Boston" and fall sound asleep.

Here is a piece of their music he would listen to at night (a portion of a song is played). Great song to listen to if you want to get psyched up to go work out, but can you imagine trying to sleep with that playing? To this day if I hear "Boston," I cringe because all this music does is remind me of insomnia!

My point is, for some of us silence does not put us at ease. It creates anxiety. You may not think that applies to you. You may think you really enjoy silence.

But if you are like most folks, on average, people can only take 15 seconds of complete silence

before they have to do something to fill it.

It's almost as if noiselessness feels empty. And that is not a feeling we like to sit in too long—emptiness. So as a result, we reach for the TV remote, car radio, mp3 player, the tablet, phone, etc., to break the silence.

Today we are continuing our series on prayer. Over the next two Sundays we will look at the spiritual practices of Silence and Solitude. Today I'm going to focus in on silence. Silence as a spiritual discipline, but also as a way of living throughout your day.

Since there was a time when people prayed and wanted to grow deeper with God, the practice of silence has always been a part of the journey. In fact, I dare you to read of any great saints who did not incorporate silence and stillness on a regular basis in order to get closer to God, or to do the work God called them to do.

One of the things about our culture and way of life is that we are surrounded by noise and high-level stimuli. This may be why, in part, silence feels more like a stranger in our lives, rather than a friend.

Electronic devices scream for our attention. Answer this, text that. Watch this movie, play this video game. iPads, cell phones, TVs, and iPods pressuring us to turn our focus in every direction but towards God. We are, as spiritual writer Richard Rohr points out, "a toxically over-stimulated people."

And then on top of this we tend to run through our days in a busy and hurried pace. Trying to meet the kids needs, the grandkids needs, our parents' needs. Working longer hours at the office just to stay financially afloat. Anyone feel out of breath just by living a normal day?

In all of this, we Christians try to sneak in a quiet time in the morning by reading the Bible and praying, etc. But if we are honest, I have the feeling that the effectiveness of that time lasts only as long as we get to the office, or to cleaning up the first spilled milk of the day. Anyone know what I'm talking about?

I want to be honest with you. I'm a huge fan of quiet times. I have them everyday. Please don't stop them. However, I have to say that it is hard to "Ten minute your way" to the life God intended.

Something else is needed throughout our day to get us where God wants to be and to keep God at the center.

Some of you may be feeling right now, "Great Steve, that's all I need to hear. Another guilt trip about doing more." But this sermon isn't simply about piling up more things to do as a Christian. It's about going deeper in the time we have in our day. It's about becoming a different kind of person throughout our day, not about adding more time consuming "Christian duties."

The world is distracting. It is noisy. It is busy. And it will always call us into its busyness and noise. You can't stop that. But you can become a different kind of person in the face of such realities. A person who prays, speaks, works, and lives from silences.

Before I get into the specifics about weaving silence into our day, let me make a more generalized point about silence as a spiritual discipline. Here's how I define spiritual disciplines: Spiritual disciplines are those spiritual exercises we engage in to give God the space, time, and attentiveness to make us more like Jesus and to create a greater intimacy with Him. They are means by which we participate with God in order to be changed by God.

Something you will never hear: "I feel really close with the Lord but I really don't make much time and space for Him in my day." That kind of statement simply cannot exist.

Some examples of spiritual disciplines are silence, solitude, fasting, meditating, praying, etc.

Now let me be very clear, the act of the discipline by itself does not change you. Fasting, solitude, silence, etc., does not make you

ipso facto more like Jesus. Only Jesus makes you more like Jesus.

Years ago I lived in Thailand as a missionary. At any given time there are around 400,000 Buddhist monks in Thailand who fast at least one meal everyday. But none of them are becoming more like Jesus. Why? Because the lack of food doesn't make you more like Jesus. Only Jesus makes you more like Jesus.

I bring this up because sometimes we Christians see spiritual disciplines as something magic that makes things happen. So what do things like solitude, silence, etc., do? They help create the conditions in which change is possible. It's kind of like inducing sleep. You can't make yourself sleep, but you can create the conditions in which sleep is possible.

So too, with spiritual disciplines. They help create the conditions in which Jesus can change us. Again, the goal of silence is not simply to go without words, but to give God a unique way of being attentive to Him in order to be changed by Him. This is crucial to understand for what comes next.

So what do we mean by Soulful Silence? There is much to say about this issue. In fact, volumes have been written on it, but let me just list a few things.

The silence I am referring to it is not simply the act of not speaking words. Some don't speak words because they are shy. And that's fine being shy. There is nothing wrong about being shy. Shy silence isn't necessarily Soulful Silence because it is a silence based on anxiety, not God. Moreover, just because we are not speaking words does not

necessarily mean something good, spiritual or transformative is going on within. Some people in their silences are criticizing others, judging them, or looking down at them, etc. Some are simply re-loading to fire something back in an argument. Others may be simply waiting for a chance to finally air their opinion. These are not the silences I'm talking about.

The silence I'm talking about here is what psalm 37:7 says. To be in silence is to, "*Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him.*" That is what I'm referring to this morning. Giving God calm, God-centered, God-attentive and God-responsive spaces in our day.

If you ever sat down with me for some counseling you would know what I mean. On Sundays you will see me often running here and there in the church. I look really busy. People have even shouted at me to slow down. And I'm thinking, "You may be having a nice leisurely day at church, but I'm working!"

Kidding aside, even though I run around teaching, leading a meeting, discipling someone, offering prayers in service, or making announcements, when I sit with someone in my office to counsel them I always slow the whole thing down by having us close our eyes and breathe deeply and slowly. I guide folks to intentionally relax their muscles and spend a few moments before we speak in sheer silence. I do this because before we say a word to each other I want us to be attentive and responsive to God. I do this because I don't want our anxieties or hurt or anger or frustrations or fears leading the way. I want Him to lead us, but that can only happen if we give Him space, time, and attentiveness through our silence.

You see, when you have to do some deep soul work, like healing a wound, or finding direction, reconciling a marriage, you will need to frequent that work with silences. Why is that? Because *some things can only be seen in silence*. Sometimes good things, beneficial things, deep things, wise things can only be seen in silence.

Helping people is not about firing away all kinds of questions or giving all kinds of answers. True soul work requires holy spaces for God's wisdom to arise. This leads me to another reason why silence is crucial to our way of living as a Christian.

Just as some things can only be seen in silence, some things should only be *said from* silence. Silence, God-attentive, God-responsive silence, is crucial because it creates spaces for wisdom to arise.

In soulful silence we Pause, we Pray, and very importantly, we Ponder. I know most, if not all of you, want to live a godly life. But listen to these words about the actions of the godly. Prov. 15:28 says, "The heart of the godly *ponders* before answering; the mouth of the wicked *gushes* with evil words." The word "ponder" means to weigh, to give serious thought to something, even to meditate silently.

Have you ever been upset and give a response to your spouse, kids, friends, co-workers without giving it serious thought? Have you ever let your mouth "gush" forth stuff you regret and that hurt others? We tend to be "gushers" rather than "ponderers," don't we?

In all seriousness, think of how the lack of the soul's ability to "ponder before answering" has

created so much pain and conflict in our relationships—at home, or with friends, coworkers, church family, small groups, you name it.

Too often couples or co-workers find themselves in a bad way relationally because they don't pause, ponder, and respond to each other from the leading of God. But rather they react and gush to the other because they are being led by their hurt or frustration or anger or pain.

So my questions for you is, when you are upset and want to respond to someone, who or what is doing the leading for your answer?

In silence we learn the important discipline of creating space and distance between our hearing and our speech. As I said before, when we pause and ponder in a soulfully silent way we are giving God space, time, and attentiveness to be changed by Him— and not just in the easy parts of our day—but right in the middle of all my anger, hurt, frustrations , etc.

I don't know about you, but when I'm hurt and angry I don't want to be changed. I want to strike out. How many of us pray in the midst of our being angry pray, "Oh, God, please change me." We might pray, "Oh, God please change *them*." But we don't pray He would change *us*. But when you learn to weave silence into your conversations, even into your arguments and confrontations, we end up in a far healthier and more life-giving place.

Recently my wife was expressing her disappointment about something I did. As she was talking I instantaneously wanted to cut her off and defend myself. But while she spoke I tried to fill my

listening and silence with the substance of pondering. For example, I was asking myself, "Why do I want to be defensive right now? Why not just hear her out?" I also began to ask, "God what are You doing here? What do You want to do here?" You get the idea.

In the end, my response to her was calm and apologetic. I simply said, "You're right. I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you please forgive me?" Did I just say all that because I just wanted her to stop talking? No! I said that because that was what God was doing in that moment. He wasn't leading me to cover my backside. He wasn't leading me to argue her down. He wasn't leading me to deny, rationalize, or excuse my behavior. He was leading me to heal a hurt and reconcile a divide.

If I didn't pause to ponder to what God was doing in that tough moment, and paused to ponder what was going on in my own heart as my wife complained, I would have missed those goals completely. And we would have spiraled down further into heat, hurt, and argument.

Let me put it this way, and this is crucial: Soulfully silent pondering gives us space in our souls to allow the *best* of us to come forth instead of the *worst* of us.

If you don't have space between your thoughts or feelings and your reactions it doesn't allow time for your real godly values to show up or speak up in your responses.

As a Christian you do value peace, intimacy, and love for people. You value it for your spouse, your kids, your friends, and your coworkers.

But those values need *pauses* so they can arise to the surface. After all, who *values* yelling at a spouse or demeaning your children or walling off the person you have long been friends with? We may *do* those things, but we don't *value* them. And that's why we need soulfully silent spaces to ponder our answers well, so that we can bring to the surface the best of who we are and what we value.

When we fail to pause, pray, and ponder we are more likely to bring to the surface defensiveness, anger, harshness, sarcasm, cutting remarks, you get the idea.

Moreover, as the Bible points out, wordiness can be hazardous to your spiritual health. Prov. 10:19 says, "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

Ever notice that wisdom is rarely expressed in the abundance of words? In part, it may be because wisdom comes from the depths of our souls and not off the top of our heads. We don't often speak or text or Instagram wisely off the cuff do we?

Over the centuries great spiritual writers have talked about how silence keeps our words from being empty and useless. Diadochus, a fifth century Christian who greatly influenced the spiritual vitality of the church, gives us a very concrete image about how our words can lose their impact if we open our mouths too much.

He compares our mouths to a Roman steam bath with its doors wide open. When a steam bath door is left open it dissipates and squanders the very thing that was to bring good to the people in the bath.

He says, "When the door of the steam bath is open; the heat inside rapidly escapes through it. Likewise the soul, in its desire to say many things, squanders its wisdom of God through the door of speech, even though everything it says may be good... Ideas of value always shun verbosity... timely silence, then, is precious, for it is nothing less than the mother of the wisest thoughts."

Let me say that again, "Timely silence is the mother of the wisest thoughts."

I think it is safe to say that all of us wish to speak "the wisest thoughts." But there is no wise speech that is not also timely speech. And wise, timely speech is forged from silence. As Christian writer Henri Nouwen put it, "A word with power is a word that comes out of silence."

Part of the reason why this is a general truth in life is because in silence we are not just waiting to speak. We are waiting to understand. We are waiting to understand the situation. We are waiting for God's leading so we can follow *Him*.

Often when I meet with people one-on-one, they will share their hearts their hurts, their hang-ups, etc. Sometimes there come moments when the emotions are strong, but the words stop. At that point the room becomes filled with an excruciatingly silence, except for the sound of heartbreak.

In that moment everything inside of me wants to break the intense awkward silence. Everything inside of me wants to lift the burden of their hurt. Have you ever been there?

But I have learned that those are the most crucial moments for

God to work both in them and *in me*. And this is why I include "me" in that. Growing up in my family, my dysfunctional family, I played a couple of crucial roles: Rescuer and Peacemaker.

It was my job to keep the peace in the screaming, yelling family circus. That may sound noble to be a peacemaker and a rescuer, but they are not noble because they were fear-based roles not God based roles. My *anxieties* made me jump to action or say just the right words to chill out an intense situation.

So you can imagine how in intense moments listening to people hurts all my old dysfunctional self wants to rush to the fore and say something!!! Say anything to take the hurt away and bring peace!!!

But here's reality, when I speak in those moments, when I want to break the "excruciating silences," it is *me* I'm serving not them, because I'm speaking to quell *my* anxieties. And here is something that I want you to burn into your heart: you can never have wise speech if it is fear-based speech. What is the basis for your speech?

Folks, there is only one Savior and it ain't me. So if I try to rescue someone by suddenly getting wordy, I'm not helping them through the wisdom and power of God.

So now, I have learned to infuse those awkward and intense moments with silent prayer waiting on God to lead the next words, not my anxiety. You see, I don't just want to speak; I want to speak a wise and timely word. I want my love to show up even through my silences.

As Christians, we want the world to know that God loves them. We want the person we are with to know that they are loved by us. But as one theologian put it, "The first duty of love is to listen" (Paul Tillich). And as another writer put it, "Silence is the training ground for the art of listening" (Linda Douty). See how that goes together? If you want to love, then learn to listen. And if you want to listen well, then you need to learn the way of silence.

You want to help people in the deepest parts of their pain and hurt? Then learn to walk in and be comfortable with real, deep, even painful silences.

At this point, you may think I have this silence stuff down, but I assure you I don't. In fact, I just recently blew it with my son.

A number of weeks ago he shared his frustrations about not being sure of what the next step is for his life. He is 23 years old and wants to move and live with purpose and intention and to have an impact on our world. When I was his age I wrestled with it, too. But I had an advantage that he didn't. You see, my son is a pretty bright guy who has a pretty good skill set for a guy his age. This leaves him with a lot of options to choose from. When I was his age I had the IQ of cabbage and the skill set of a doorknob. I could basically do this or that, but not much more! So my choices were a lot more limited.

As he and I talked I felt bad about his frustrations, so I offered up some lame advice to help rescue him from his struggle. After I did this he responded with a calm voice and said, "Yeah, I know. If I do X, then Y can happen, then Z, etc." I suddenly realized he had already thought through this line of

thinking. Here I was thinking I was some sort of sage, a regular Socrates in blue jeans, and he's looking at me like, "Thank you, Captain Obvious." I felt foolish. I really needed to keep the yap of my steam bath door shut and just sit with him in his frustrated silence and pray for God's leading.

Now let's finish by briefly talking about some "How To's" when it come to silence as a regular spiritual discipline.

You may be asking how many times should one be silent like this in a day? Hopefully by now, you can see as many time as you need and for as long as you are able. There is not one way to do this, but let me just share few things as a suggested pathway into silence into stilling your soul before the Lord.

1) Silence anything electronic. Simply seeing your phone glow or buzz or beep will trigger your compulsive neurons in your brain and distract you.

2) Breathe slowly through your nose (this calms your brain and body). At first count slowly to 5 or 6 as you breathe in and the same when you breath out.

3) Use a Breath Prayer - Then instead of counting use what is called "a Breath Prayer". For example, "Lord Jesus help me feel loved." "Father show me Your wisdom." Or simply, "Oh Lord, God help!" Breathe these words in then out.

4) Move toward Wordless Silence. Then shorten the words to just two, then one, then just be wordless in silence. If your "Monkey Mind" starts to jumping to thought to thought, just say to yourself, "I'll deal with you later," and go back to the breath prayer.

5) Wait for God to end the time. This is a really hard part for me. So many things want to end my silence. The desire to read the Bible. The desire to journal. The email I have to send, etc. Try to hold off until you feel God leading you to stop.

This may take just five minutes or just two minutes or maybe even just 30 seconds. It doesn't have to take a long time. Try to do this before and/or after your quiet times. Do it right before starting a class. Do it before or after a department meeting. You may not realize it, but God is in your day and He was in that meeting in some way. Why not spend some time "debriefing with God" about the meeting?

Again, when we are in silence we are giving God space, time, and attentiveness to change us. We are giving God room in our souls for Him to move back into the center of our lives. And very often, He comes back into the center of our lives through the door we provide through being Soufully Silent. It is only when God is at the center of our lives that we can hope to find the healing and wisdom and love and power to live well; to live deeply, soulfully, and vibrantly as God intended.

Let's take a few moments now to breathe through your nose, relax your body, and be attentive to God. This past half hour you have heard many words. But what is God's word for you in this moment right now?

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com