

## ***The Silence Between Us***

Text: Mark 1: 35-39; Matthew 7: 7-8; I Thessalonians 5: 12-22

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

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*Sorry God! I can't seem to pray today.  
My thoughts are all in a tangle,  
and my words are nowhere to be found.  
I get that way sometimes.  
I guess I'm just in a restless and funky place.  
So, if it is okay with you,  
I think I'll just leave silence in the space between us  
and maybe you can fill in what you think I need to say.<sup>1</sup>*

**Sometimes in prayer, as in all of life, it's the silence that we need more.** Sometimes we have no words to express even terribly important events, or longings or needs. Sometimes what's deepest within only finds a frown or a sigh or nothing at all.

I suspect that's what Tom Gordon was trying to express in those brief words of prayer that I just read. He wanted to connect with God - enough to say "sorry," "can't do," "tangled thoughts." But then he wanted to let the silence between them to do the rest.

Might it have been like that for Jesus who, as Mark tells us, sought out a lonely place to pray even before dawn? What that small story does not reveal is whether Jesus was praying the worded kind of prayer, or the sort that opens up the silence in-between.

**Roy Oswald is a Lutheran pastor who often led retreats for clergy.** Once in Scottsdale, Arizona he taught three-dozen of us to fill the room with what he called a guttural groan - a kind of communal chant that created a near palpable rumble.

We did so for 3 minutes until he said, "Stop now and enjoy the silence." The contrast was astonishingly powerful. It was mystical. "Prayer needs to be something of both," he said, "found in the balance between the noises we make and our hunger for silence."

And then Roy taught us more. He took it another step telling us that St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit Order, identified two primary postures of prayer we need to hold in tandem - two directionally different ways that we might engage.<sup>2</sup>

**The first are prayers that speak to God.** These are called kataphatic prayers and, simply put, they are conversations formed around our agendas and needs with lots of content and words as we do the talking and expect that God will do the listening.

They invite us to name, identify and give voice to the concerns for which we need support and guidance. They follow and trust the sequence that Jesus offers: "Ask and it shall be given; seek and you will find; knock and it will be open to you."

The second posture of prayer is called apophatic. Here the focus is not talking to God, rather, it is listening for God. These are the kind of prayers where we try to listen for God and, and as Roy encouraged us to do, to enjoy the silence.

Apophatic prayers aren't aimed at our concerns, rather, they feature what God is revealing to us. They invite a kind of quietness, a stillness, an openness of which the Psalmist speaks: "Be still . . . be still and know . . . be still and know that I am God."

**So kataphatic and apophatic.** Neither one is better than the other. Each has its place and value. In fact, one instead of the other, or one presumed more important than the other is neither balanced nor Biblically grounded.

I suspect that in a culture such as ours that is so heavily skewed with needs to control, manage and master; and one that is so much less focused on surrender, relinquishing and letting go the ratio of one to the other is probably a bit tipsy.

Mahatma Gandhi once wrote: "Prayer is not asking. It is, rather, a longing of the soul. It's a daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart."

**One more thought.** Paul's letter to the community gathered in Thessaloniki that Glen read for us is a benediction to the troubles of their days. It seems particularly apropos to the contradictions that mark so many of our days.

In his words: pray without ceasing. He advised it so because he knew that prayer was not a once-off, now and then, here and there kind of an isolated activity. It was, rather, a practice and discipline to be woven in to the fabric of daily life."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus called this the importunity of prayer – the persistence to keep at it with the full spectrum of life unfolding: from the anger that lives in our land to the beauty of a summer sunset; and I dare say from El Paso to Dayton to our broken hearts.

So let's sing about that just before we come to the Table of Life and Hope where in words and silence God awaits. Amen.

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First Church  
12 South Main Street  
West Hartford, CT 06107

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Paynter. We Bring Your Everything. Wild Goose Publications, 2017, pp. 91-94.

<sup>2</sup> Roy M. Oswald et al. Discerning Your Congregation's Future. The Alban Institute, 1996, p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver. The Gospel in Miniature. Skylight Paths Publishing, 2018, p. 220.