

Good morning everybody! Happy Labor Day weekend! It's good to see everybody here—you all are dedicated group coming out to worship today! This Sunday marks the final sermon in our worship series on the Sacred in the Ordinary and today, we're talking the sacred in silence. It's really important to me that we talk about the sacred in silence because finding silence in our lives is harder and harder to do. I want you, just for a moment, to think about what a typical day is like for you... And I want you to notice, Is there a time in your day when you consistently have an opportunity to have a few minutes of silence?

I ask this because more and more I think that if we want to have silence in our lives, we have to actually carve it out for ourselves. We can't just expect that silence will exist in our lives because from the moment we wake up in the morning to the time we go to bed at night, there is some form of stimulation and noise that is vying for our attention. A lot of the time we don't even notice all the noise in our lives. We get into the habit of turning on the news to get our morning going, or blast the radio during our commute to work, until before long, every moment in our day is filled with some kind of noise and all possibilities for silence are programmed out of our schedule.

I don't think this is how we want it to be really... I recently talked with a friend of mine who has a nine year old son, and he told me that as they were driving somewhere and talking about their day, his son was brave enough to say that while they were driving he preferred that they be silent together. And my friend told me that

his son's request for that quiet time reminded him that when he was about that age, he felt the same way and needed that silence in his own life but had lost awareness of that need as an adult. And I think this happens to all of us...Somewhere inside ourselves, we long for quiet then slowly we program it out of our lives until noise and staying busy feels better and silence starts to feel scary.

When I say all of this, I'm ABSOLUTELY speaking from personal experience. I grew up really appreciating quiet moments, but as I got older, I started to believe that my life was only as valuable as what I was doing and achieving, so like lots of people I created a life with a lot of noise and busyness. So today I want to tell you a story from my own life about a time when I learned something truly profound about silence by realizing just how terrified I was of having it in my own life. So let me set it up for you.

It was the first week of March in 2021 and I was about one day into the Spring reading week that I got as a student before midterms in my final semester of Seminary. I decided that I was going to go out for a run before hunkering down to do some work and I was really eager to listen to one of my favorite podcasts, as show called *This American Life*.

So I'm running along, listening to this podcast, as one of the producer's, a guy named Sean Cole introduced the first act of the episode. He explained that on New Year's Day, he'd gone to a "marathon of performances" at the St. Mark's Poetry Project

which is housed in an old cathedral in New York City and at this event, a variety of musicians, comedians, poets, and performers ranging from Patti Smith to complete unknowns get up and showcase their work. But the performers had a rule: Regardless of how well known or unknown an artist might be, everyone had only 2 to 3 minutes to perform and every so often when people stretched that time limit, someone would get up on stage and remind people to keep it short. Sean explained that at the performance, he saw someone break this rule in an incredible way and introduced Jerome Ellis—A composer, performer, and writer who got up to the microphone with no instrument or anything and began to speak, so as I was running along, the audio of Jerome’s performance began to play.

Rather than explain anything more than that, I’m going to play the audio for you of Jerome’s performance. It won’t have any of the commentary I heard from the podcast and I’d like to invite you to just take it all in. So, without further ado, this is Jerome Ellis at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project.

Thank you for listening to that. A year and a half ago I heard that story while I was running and I have to tell you, it stopped me in my tracks...Like I actually had to stop, I could not move. Because if you are anything like me, when that story started and there was a long silence after Jerome began to explain this law from Brazil about cell phone companies, I was ready to tune out the rest of the story completely. And I at least had the producer of the podcast walking me through what was

happening...He explained that he thought Jerome might be doing some kind of performance art about spotty cell phone coverage...

But even with that explanation to make the silence a bit less confusing, I want to tell you very honestly what my first reaction was. When that long silence fell over me and I started to hear my feet hitting the pavement with every step I took, I thought, “Oh no, forget this, I do not have time for this. I need something to listen to right now.”

And I seriously pulled out my phone to look for something else to listen to.

Thankfully before I could do that, Jerome’s voice pierced the silence and he explained that the law was for customers with breaks in the timing and fluency of their speech—And as he went on to explain that he had a speech impediment, my jaw dropped.

I suddenly understood that the silence was because Jerome was speaking with a stutter. I thought, “How could I be so ignorant? So unwilling to give him my time and attention?” I was floored. And as the episode went on, Sean Cole explained that the reaction I was having in real time was basically what happened to him and the entire audience who saw the performance unfold that day. Everyone was uncomfortable in the silence and wasn’t really paying attention until it became clear what was going on. Once people understood that Jerome was speaking with a stutter, a jolt went through the room and everyone was spellbound by Jerome’s performance.

I've listened to Jerome's story many times at this point and I have to tell you, I think it's genius. Because in that first silence, he proves his point about temporal accessibility in a way that is undeniable. I was completely unwilling to give Jerome my time at first. And that breaks my heart because he had something so profound to say. I very nearly missed it. And in every silence after that first one, my heart broke for all of the people that I have ever been unwilling to give my time and attention to. What wisdom and truth have I missed because I was unwilling to sit in silence or discomfort?

I think this brings up a really important question: Why was it that everyone at the St. Mark's Poetry Project was so unable to sit in the silence that day? Why was it so unbearable that I was ready to turn off the episode all together? I honestly think that it's so uncomfortable because for most of us, to be in that silence means that we have to confront ourselves. We have to sit with the truth of who we are and what it is that we amount to ultimately and for a lot of us that is absolutely terrifying.

I will tell you that without a doubt, that is why I was ready to switch the episode off the moment that silence rang through my ears. Because as I mentioned earlier, it was the first day of reading week in my final semester of Seminary and when that week came to an end, I was only a few weeks of course work and exams away from my graduation. I was *supposed to* have job prospects, I was supposed to be excited about my future, but the truth was, I'd spent the past year in virtual school isolated from my

peers and professors and that took a toll on me. I was tired and completely unsure about what was to come. I wasn't able to formally begin a job search yet because of where I was in my ordination process and so job prospects were limited.

All this is to say that when things got quiet, all I could hear in my mind was: Will I have a job? Where am I going to live? What will people think when they see that I don't know where I am going or what I'm doing? And to be completely candid, the real question I couldn't sit with was...What does this say about me? Somewhere inside myself, I believed that I was only as valuable as what I did and achieved and so, in the quiet, I thought, if I'm only as valuable as what I do and achieve and I've got nothing lined up, I must not amount to very much. Any and all silence meant that those questions and where they led me to moved from being the whispers in the back of my mind to being impossible for me to ignore. I did not want to confront any of those questions and silence meant I would have to.

It feels fitting that I was running as this inner drama was unfolding because I can see now that I was trying the best I could to run away from the realities that I would have to face in sitting still and remaining silent. And thank goodness for Jerome Ellis who stopped me in my tracks and forced me to confront myself in his silences. It was as though Jerome was saying, "You can try to run away, but all those things you are running from are coming with you whether you like it or not."

You know, earlier I mentioned that it broke my heart that I was unwilling to give Jerome my time and nearly missed the profound truth he had to share...And that made me think all the wisdom I have missed in my life because I was unwilling to give my time and attention to someone else. But the truth is he helped me to see that in running from silence I don't just miss truth and wisdom from other people—I take away the opportunity to find it within myself. And I know for a fact that there isn't a person here this morning that has not done the same thing. We spend so much time and energy running from the fear of what we might find in ourselves if we embraced silence, when in reality, if we're able to stop and surrender to that silence, we're not only able to confront the fear with courage but we also discover wisdom in ourselves. And I deeply believe that our unwillingness to sit in the discomfort we confront in silence means that we miss wisdom from others, we miss wisdom from ourselves, and perhaps most importantly, we miss out on the wisdom that comes from God's voice that speaks to us in the silence.

Our Scripture for today is one that illustrates this beautifully. I shared two Scriptures with you this morning, both from the Gospel of Mark. And Mark's Gospel is one where Jesus is constantly on the move. Throughout Mark, there is this Greek word that shows up over and over again—"euthos" which means, "Immediately." Jesus goes somewhere, something happens, and IMMEDIATELY he's off to the next thing. But he is also constantly trying to get away from people and get some silence

and time alone. I've always loved this line we read in Mark 4 verse 36 that says "And leaving the crowd behind, they took Jesus with them in the boat just as he was."

Because I've heard scholars say that what this line conveys is that Jesus is tired of being around people—he was cranky and they took him away from people just as he was so that he could get some quiet time to recharge. So we see very clearly that Jesus had to carve out silence for himself to hear God's voice speaking.

But beyond just that, I think these are Scriptures where we see what happens when we allow fear to overpower peace and silence. In the first Scripture I read for us this morning, a storm arises while Jesus and the disciples are out at sea. Jesus is evidently wiped out because he is asleep and the disciples come to him in a panic, upset that Jesus doesn't seem to care that they are struggling in the storm. Jesus is able to calm the storm by saying, "Peace! Be still!" and he is astounded that the disciples have no faith that the storm will cease. It's as though he is telling the disciples rather than the storm to Be still and silent because if they would only stop for a second, they'd realize that the storm will cease.

But something I think we don't always appreciate about this Scripture, is that only two chapters later, Jesus and the disciples find themselves in essentially the same situation. Jesus is once again, taking some time to be silent and alone, when another storm arises out at sea. Again, the disciples again are terrified, and they don't know what to do. So Jesus walks to them on the water to calm the storm yet again and they are

utterly astounded. It's like they forgot what Jesus just told them the first time: Peace, be still. Jesus has to tell them yet again: Join me in silence and you will find that peace far greater than your fear.

The disciples are understandably swept away by fear and cannot sit in the discomfort of that fear for long enough to recognize that the storm will pass. They aren't in a place where they can calm themselves enough to know that the storm will be still just like before. I certainly see myself in that.

So here is what I want you to know: Sitting in silence long enough to confront the truth of who we are is hard. It cuts to that sensitive nerve of who we truly are and what we amount to and it is a place where we hear questions and thoughts that are scary. But if you can sit in that place long enough, you will come to find that the fear does not last forever and that silence is the birthplace of meaning and true peace.

What we find in silence and stillness has so much to teach us if we are only willing to listen to what comes from within us. For me, I can tell you that it took time for me to be able to sit in the discomfort of what I was running from that day because I was running from the fear that I was ultimately worthless if I had no achievements to prove my worth. Sitting with that fear long enough to hear what it was trying to tell me was one of the hardest things I have ever done to be perfectly honest with you. But I learned something I hope I will never forget: I am far more than what I do or achieve and I am so much more than what my worst critics think of me. All of that is

true for you too. And what I want you to know is that when we sit in silence and listen to the wisdom from within, our anxieties and fears over time, melt away and that is when we truly experience God's love and hear God's voice.

Silence is so important because sadly, I think so few of us really know what is going on in our bodies and minds. And that leads us to deny a lot of our true feelings, to privilege the voices of people who don't have our best interests at heart, and to act in ways that perpetuate hurt to ourselves and other people. I think it's really important for us to find silence in our lives so we can hear ourselves and hear God's voice because that's what we need to be able to heal what is broken in ourselves so we don't just keep making the same mistakes over and over again. If we're going to find a way to heal individually and collectively in this world, we have to find silence so we can listen to the wisdom that comes from each of us.

I want to end this morning by telling you one more short story from just a few weeks ago. Two days before I drove from Princeton to Michigan, I went out for a walk in a neighborhood near where I was living. I decided that rather than doing what I love to do when I am nervous which is listen to something while I walk, I would leave my headphones at home and appreciate some silence. And as I was walking out of nowhere, I came across this trail I had never seen before. Princeton is old—most of its trails are not new, but this one was and it was kind of wedged between these big homes on the outer edge of town. And the moment I walked onto the trail I saw a

woman there pulling weeds. She ended up telling me that she and a group of high school students had decided to make this trail to save the land from being built on because the land that was very important for wildlife in the area. As she talked, she picked up this feather and showed to me then stuck in her pocket and we ended up having an amazing conversation about sacred moments in nature and I told her I'd be moving here to begin a ministry of helping people appreciate these sacred moments. Eventually we both went our separate ways, but this woman told me to pass by her mailbox on my walk home because she was going to put some maps of the trails in there for me. So when I walked home, I stopped by her mailbox and she had also included a beautiful card for me. And much to my surprise, when I opened the card, I found that she'd put that feather from the trail in the card for me. And she wrote: "Blue feathers are a sign of being on the right path—this is the one I found upon our path. It will help light yours." And I came to you all a day later. I don't think it's a coincidence that silence led me to that moment nor do I think I would have ended up on the path to this church had I continued to run from the truths I would have to confront in silence. So what I want you to know is this—To be still. To find silence. It is hard. It is uncomfortable because in it, you confront the deepest truths of who you are. But if you are willing to sit in that discomfort and listen to the wisdom that comes from within, you may discover truths that will set you free and you will be able to confront all that keeps you from your truest path. So I say to you: Peace. Be still. Do

not be afraid. God is in you and you will hear God if you are brave enough to sit in silence and listen. Amen.