

Sermon: Make Yourself a Space**Scripture: Psalm 46****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 18, 2018**

We are, to some extent, going against the grain of traditional Christian practice and theology when we claim that silence is a critical part of Christian spiritual practice and devotion. So those of you who are like my flaming extroverted clergy friend who when hearing me rave about our Lenten Silent Retreat last weekend said – “I think I’d rather have had a root canal,” I want to acknowledge your perspective and admit that you could make a convincing case that we shouldn’t put too much emphasis on silence during our worship and prayer life.

You don’t have to go any further than to the first chapter of Genesis and the mythical account of the beginnings of the world or to the first chapter of John and read the opening description of Jesus to find that it all begins with what? The WORD! Silence is actually a part of the formless void until God SPEAKS creation into being. And throughout the Hebrew bible God’s speaking to humanity and humanity speaking back to God is what it’s all about! You have to look carefully to find any kind of encouragement toward silence... and we found two of the primary ones - Psalm 46:10 and the Elijah story. But against those few examples are volumes and volumes of words and arguments, laws and rulings, prayers and praising, blessings and condemnations that suggest that God is ALL about words and that our praise of God should be boisterous and verbose accompanied with as much noise as you can make using harps and lyres, drums and cymbals, horns and

“...jungtinglers, floofloovers and tartookas... blow your whohoopers, and bang your gardookas ...!” Sorry about that, but I’m pretty sure the Grinch was an introvert and I feel his pain with all the noise of the Whoos down in Whoville... all the noise, noise, noise, noise! But the scriptures seem to suggest that God doesn’t mind the noise. Even the Psalm we had for this morning expressing that beautiful line “be still and know that I am God” is still 90% noisy with earth tumult and warfare and city life and only 10% - at most - silence and stillness.

Silence in the New Testament fares a little better but not by much. Yes, we sing about Jesus coming on a silent night, holy night, but scripturally even the nativity is a boisterous story with angels choirs and shepherds chattering, a busy Bethlehem with no room in the inn and a war-hungry King doing bad things. And Jesus himself comes preaching and healing and praying with words upon words and he says if we are silent then the rocks will cry out and there are his 7 last words from the cross and the command to go forth and preach the Gospel... and so remind me, Kathleen, why we are doing a service extoling the virtues of silence? Because, I suggested it? Oh yeah.

Cause actually, despite the lack of emphasis on silence in the scripture I am convinced it’s really really important... for our individual spiritual lives and for the corporate life of our church as well. And it’s important because at least 3 things are true – 1. That despite the lack of emphasis on it in our scripture there has always been a minority strain in the Christian tradition across all the ages that has held firm to the necessity of the practice of silent prayer and meditation in human relationship with God, from the early desert fathers and mothers to the

later mystics, from the even later Quakers and now contemporary practitioners of Centering Prayer or Christian Meditation;... it is a true and deep strain of our tradition that is at home with the words of the great mystic Meister Eckhart “there is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence.” 2. This strain of contemplative Christian practice connects us in a beautiful way to most every other world religion out there and *their* practices with silence and stillness. We can’t necessarily join with them saying “Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, true god and true man” but we certainly can all fall silent together in wordless adoration of the divine presence at the heart of universe; and 3. Thirdly, the more words I hear coming across the television or my Iphone screen or across the computer or through the radio, the more I am convinced – quite frankly – that we should shut up more; for our sakes, for others sakes, for God’s sake! I know, ironic coming from a preacher! And coming from a white heterosexual cisgender male, let me clarify that I am not referring to the breaking of silence that women and other oppressed people are doing now in our culture. Those are words of truth and liberation in the face of having been silenced, which is a very different thing.

What I am talking about is silence as a freely chosen spiritual practice in humility that acknowledges we don’t always have the words for what needs to be said, especially when it comes to the deeper mysteries of life; silence that is speechless devotion and attention to the miracle of life and the love of God; silence that makes ourselves a space, that quiets the inner chatter and the outer distractions to create a spaciousness for God’s presence to be experience, God’s voice to be

heard, God's face to be seen beneath the surface of life. I am certain that if we as a church can offer that to people, especially in this day and age, if through this community and in this place people could experience a sacred stillness and silence that connected them to the transcendent mystery threading through all of life, then we'd be offering something profound that money simply cannot buy.

And let me say, that it's already happening here and was happening before I came is evident and one of the reasons I wanted to come in the first place. Have you been out to our labyrinth lately - in the better weather - and seen people sitting on the benches, gazing at the water, walking the stones there? Have you noticed the line that forms here to light prayer candles during Lent? Whether you've sat at the vigil or not, haven't you appreciated the 30 hours from Maundy Thursday to Good Friday when our community sits in vigil and prayer in this space? Have you joined our 30 or so folks on Tuesday nights who do Centering Prayer/Meditation in silence together? Do you know that we are considering a meditation circle built into the floor of Ripley Chapel and other contemplative practices that the space is going to open up for us. I'm preaching to the choir because this congregation, YOU, understand how profound a gift it is to offer a place of stillness, quiet, and holiness in the pace and noise of our modern world and I for one am grateful for it.

And so in this Spirit, we want to invite you to one of 5 healing stations - 2 in the back and 3 up front where there will be a team of people prepared to offer you silent healing prayer this morning. You'll be invited to sit down and the 3 people at each station will lay their

hands on you for about 45 seconds (or cross your arms like this when you sit and that will indicate you'd prefer not to be touched). The people around you will not be praying in words but rather just opening themselves in silence to God's spirit so they can be conduits of God's love for you. You do not have to come forward with a specific request for healing in mind or a particular need but simply to surrender to what God has to offer you.

Sometimes we don't know what we need from God, even if we think we do. God knows us better than we know ourselves and God knows what we need. Sometimes we really aren't sure how to put into worded prayer what we are feeling. It's ok, because God understands without our having to use words. Sometimes we feel so much that words just aren't adequate. God hears our deeper groans and gets us and loves us. So you are invited to come to these stations surrendering words, just opening to God. Just for a moment, melt into the quiet and receive the power of Spirit that comes through silence and stillness.

The Samaritan woman at the well says at one point "you have no bucket and the well is deep". This morning we invite you to make of yourself an empty bucket and we'll help to dip you into the deep well of God's presence and receive the living water that will heal and satisfy.

You are welcome to stay seated, of course. We'd just invite you to be in solidarity with us by praying as you see fit. Let us pray...

Welcome And Announcements

We welcome you to worship this morning at First Congregational Church in Winchester whether this is your first time here or your first time back in the church in a while, whether you are comfortable and confident in your relationship with God or questioning and uncertain, we hope you will feel a sense of welcome and sacred space here cause this is not our church but God's church and you as God's beloved are welcome here.

Today is our annual Healing Service and Health Ministry Sunday and so is a little different from our usual Sundays. We usually don't begin with thrumming notes filling the air but are lifting up the theme of the healing power of silence and stillness amidst all the noise and rush in our lives and so this is part of the background noise we hope to make you more fully conscious of even as we then shift to song and silence.

I encourage you to read through the announcements as we have a lot happening around the community with Holy Week and Easter coming up. To highlight just a few - Tuesday is our Tuesdays with Jesus with Julianne Zimmerman promising a great talk on Jesus and Venture Capital, Thursday we host a community-wide conversation on Mental Health in Chidley Hall and Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and so we'll begin at 9:30 out on the Town Common with our sister Winchester churches to bless our palm branches together.

Thank you and welcome to worship.