

The Silence of God

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Text: Matthew 15:21-28

So here we are, all together, as we sing our songs, joyfully! Here we are, and almost everywhere I look, I see smiles and eager expectant faces. This building is full of happy campers, right?

I wonder, though, how much of the joy, how much of the small talk and laughter after church; how much of it is a mask, at least for some of us?

In fact, deep down inside, a few of us are having a very difficult time—spiritually, I mean. We come to church, but given the tragedy and pain that stalks us at home, it takes an act of will to be here and smile. We sing along with the choir, but the words of the hymns strike more than a few of us as hollow. Most of us believe, but for some of us it is with a mix of fear, cynicism and weariness thrown in.

That is why, this morning, I'd like to get past the mask of churchgoing to the heart of faith—or lack of it. I do not promise easy answers, a band aid that will make all your hidden spiritual pain go away. Religion that majors in band aids minors in reality, after all.

In any case, I have a story, the story of a woman, a gentile woman, who came to Jesus looking for a miracle. She wanted Jesus to do the exorcist thing, to throw some demons out of her daughter. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" she says. "My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

(pause)

She came to Jesus, and Jesus did not answer her a word.

(absolute silence 1 minute).

Unexpected silence is uncomfortable. In this story, Jesus' silence makes the disciples feel uncomfortable too, so they urge Jesus to send that woman away. A band aid for their discomfort.

But imagine how Jesus' silence must have felt for the unnamed Canaanite woman. She stands there, expecting an answer, a "yes" or a "no," but Jesus doesn't answer her a word.

This is the **silence of God**, and it comes in many shapes and forms.

Take almost anyone here, for example. Most of the time, most of us swim through life. At church, we sing and eat cookies and talk about the Maple Leafs and God seems quite nice, thank-you very much. But just wait. One day, without warning, one by one, most of us will also confront failure or suffering or financial setback and then God won't seem very nice anymore. In fact, it will seem as if God has abandoned us. **This is the silence of God.**

Others come to church but are never sure. They have never felt that God put something on their hearts. They don't claim, like some Christians, to have a personal relationship with Jesus. For some here today, scripture may be interesting, or even inspiring. But it nevertheless also mostly seems like endless lists of irrelevant laws and genealogies and dead kings. Some people love church but have never really met God here. **This too is the silence of God.**

We live in a time when humanity teeters on the edge of disaster. Climate change. Massive species die-offs. A narcissist and bully president in the United States. Change at the speed of light that threatens our jobs and ease. Housing prices out of reach for our kids. And God? Well, God hasn't rearranged the stars to spell out a cosmic message about how we can fix things. **More divine silence.**

And in our story, too, Jesus doesn't answer the nameless woman a word. So the disciples become antagonistic towards her. And still, the nameless woman won't leave. She has a daughter, Carrie, who is demon-possessed.

So, finally, dismissively, Jesus says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Still, even though she isn't one of *those* lost sheep, she stubbornly stands there, begging, "Lord help me." In desperation, because he really wants to get rid of her, Jesus adds, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Jesus uses a racial slur to try to get rid of her. Jesus calls her a filthy dog because she isn't Jewish, like him. We never expected it, but he said it. And still she stands there, brow beaten, withering under what we would call hate speech.

And this too is the **silence of God**, when those who should be speaking for God, blessing us with the universe's better angels, dehumanize us instead. Like teachers and religious denominations that supported the residential schools, like abusive preachers and priests or even parents. It happens.

Worse, the woman seems to go along with Jesus to get along. "Yes Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

"Yes Lord" I guess I'm not a Jew.

"Yes Lord" I guess I am sort of like a dog under the table.

"Yes Lord" I guess I don't deserve your love or healing.

In spite of the nameless woman's amazing love for her daughter, it is not a very inspiring passage for Family Day, is it? And the temptation, here, I think—one that I have fallen into in the past, when I preached on this text in another place and time—the temptation here is to refuse to read this story for what it literally is, to spiritualize its hard edges away. The temptation is to somehow explain away Jesus' silence, his racist comments, and the woman's willingness to stand and be beaten down, to embrace her own dehumanization.

But I'm done with white washing scripture. I do not condone Jesus' racist words, I condemn them. And I want to try to understand Jesus' initial silence, and how it points to the silence of God. So here, with a bit of help from the great late liberal theologian Helmut Thielicke is what I think, for starters.

In a sermon on this passage, Thielicke says that mysterious things sometimes happen when God is silent. Consider the silence of the cross, for example, after Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When the sun hid its face and only the silent stars dared look on.

According to the story, during that silence the temple veil was cut in two, tombs spilled their dead, and Jesus joined us in our death. But, what is perhaps a greater miracle, after the silence of his grave, Jesus' followers mysteriously decided to embrace the new life suggested by Jesus' love, by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his giving priority to the poor, the least, and the last. The silence of God, suggests Thielicke, did not have the last word in Jesus' life. That's hopeful, given the mistake Jesus made with the nameless woman.

But I think there is more to the silence of God than supposing that it does not have necessarily have the last word. Ultimately, I think the silence of God is essential for humanity if we want to become good. You see, when I read scripture, from beginning to end, I think of it as a long, long story about how God has strategically and lovingly withdrawn from our day to day lives—like a parent letting go of a grown child—in order to allow us to become more fully human than we are when we always call on God to fix things up for us.

What I mean is this. From the days when Adam and Eve walked and talked with God, to when Moses met God at a burning bush and didn't quite get his name, and then met God in the clouds on Mount Sinai but didn't get to see him face to face, to the days when God only spoke through prophets, and then only through dreams, and finally not at all, anymore unless you count Jesus, who was after all, a man. What I mean is this. From the beginning of scripture to its end until this very day today, God has been strategically and lovingly disappearing in order to allow us to become more fully human than we are when we think we always have God at our beck and call.

God's ultimate plan for the human race is not for us to lean on him (or her) as a crutch, as if we have to hear him in each and every wind of doctrine and clutch at him from every foxhole and think of him as speaking to us whenever we have an unbidden thought. No, what we need to do, as humans, instead, is lean on God's past interactions and instructions as inspiration to become truly, fully human today. We are to lean on God's past interactions and instructions so that, without God pulling all the strings, we can overcome slavery ourselves, so that we can tackle racism ourselves, so that we can embrace gay or transsexual people with joy no matter what hints to the contrary we may think to find in scripture, so that we can smile on people living together while all together worrying about and working on the greater issues that face us: peace, justice, and shalom for all.

And if God *is* silent—perhaps we will make our churches less a pretending place where we put on faces and smile behind masks, and more a safe place where we lean on each other, and speak the truth to each other; perhaps if God *is* silent, perhaps we will make our church places where we can weep together just as we drink coffee together, where we get real with each other just as we sing together, because in spite of a few mistakes Jesus made along the way, as with the nameless woman, ultimately this is the sort of family Jesus has called us to be. A family that can withstand the silence of God by embracing each other.

And sure, Jesus finally tells the unnamed woman that on account of her great faith her daughter was healed. That was a miracle. A miracle, however, is something you cannot, by definition, bet on or count on.

Whereas our miracle, even in the face of the silence of God, is that here we can, if we choose, count on each other.