

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 11, 2015  
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15  
"Silence"

An old saying goes, "Silence is golden." And in fact, the book of Ecclesiastes tells us, "There is a time for silence and a time to speak." Knowing when to speak and when to be silent however is a difficult art to master. Sir Frances Bacon once said, "Silence is the virtue of fools." Abraham Lincoln added, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends." All wise words. All spoken words.

Amos, the prophet of God was sent to the corrupt Northern Kingdom of Israel where he also spoke about silence. He observed two things about silence. First he noted, "Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time" (Amos 5:13). And second, he observed, "They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth" (Amos 5:10). Silence might keep you personally safe in evil times, but through the prophet, God is teaching us that in the face of evil, one cannot remain silent even if he must endure hatred because in the face of evil, silence must be broken or it becomes deadly.

Silence is one of the devil's best friends. Silence takes over and has one quietly watching as others depart from the Lord and begin to worship that which is not God because we are afraid to say something. And this becomes deadly when the people of God are led to false worship under the guise of cultural relevance. Israel tried this path years before as they set up centers of worship in places like Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba, contrary to the Lord's own command that they should worship only in Jerusalem. Yet some thought it a good idea to establish altars where they could worship the Lord with more convenience. After all it was a long walk to Jerusalem with your goat or lamb. And people gave their consent to this transgression by remaining silent until God broke the silence speaking through His prophet, Amos, and called out to Israel, "Seek Me and live" (Amos 5:4). Through these words God calls His people away from false worship: "Don't seek Me in Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal, or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile and Bethel shall come to nothing" (Amos 5:4). Silence is deadly when we remain silent as the false religions of our world claim victims all around us and we refrain from speaking because we fear the reaction of our culture.

Silence also ignores the cries of the powerless. Silence turns deadly when those who have no power are oppressed by the ones who do. In ancient Israel the city gates were a type of small claims court where the poor and disenfranchised could come to seek redress and justice. But in Amos' day they were finding no justice at the gates. Thus Yahweh says through Amos, "Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate" (Amos 5:11-12). Our silence turns deadly when we refuse to speak for those

who have no voice. Consider the endless trail of dead bodies that surround us: the unborn...aborted and we remain silent; the elderly...euthanized and we remain silent; the child...cast aside and neglected and we remain silent; those who suffer here and around the world because they confess the name of Jesus with their lips and we remain silent.

Why do we hold our tongues? Why do we refuse to speak? Is it not because we want to save ourselves? Every age produces a multitude of people who while seeing evil and knowing that it is wrong, yet remain silent because they fear what other people will think and say more than they fear what God will think and say. In fact, a military officer once said to a Lutheran chaplain that leadership "means running toward the sound of gunfire." The simple fact is that most people will duck for cover and silently watch as someone else runs toward the danger. At most, they will privately tell the one who does speak, "I agree with you," but will themselves take no risk to speak. Our silence in the face of evil may seem prudent from the perspective of personal safety and benefit, but by our silence we find ourselves condemned by the Law of God. Now is not the time for silence but repentance!

God is not silent! God breaks the silence through His prophets. Amos was but one of very many. Some of them we know through what they recorded and some we know by what they said. Some of the prophets we don't know at all. Their voices have been lost in the stream of history. But their voices stand united as they continue to speak to all generations. And their voice calls us to repentance and to mourn our silence in the face of evil.

Two thousand years ago, it seemed as if those voices of the prophets had been forever stilled. For four hundred years, since the close of the Old Testament, the silence seemed to reign.

And then seemingly out of nowhere there came "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." This voice spoke clearly and directly as the antithesis of modern "people skills:" "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" he said. Here was a voice that was anything but prudent. Here was one who would not keep silent in such a time, for it was an evil time. And yet it was the same John who pointed the way to another saying, "Behold, this one is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

And then God broke the silence. He announced with no equivocation, "This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him." And indeed that Lamb of God was the One who had been speaking all along through the mouths of the prophets. Now He Himself, the One who was greater than Moses, the prophet, would speak directly with His people. And we see it throughout Jesus' life. We see Him cleansing the temple of the den of thieves. We see Him challenging the pretentious self-righteousness of Pharisees, Sadducees and priests alike. We see Him bringing justice to those who were oppressed, wholeness to those who were broken, and hope to those who suffered.

Jesus refused to be a silent observer in an evil time. Oh, He could be silent, to be sure. He stood before His accusers and was silent like a lamb taken to the slaughter. But this, to be led to the slaughter, is exactly why He had come.

He also came to speak the Truth and nothing but the Truth however and that Truth happened to be Himself. He came to redeem all of us who exchange the Truth for safety. He came to be lifted up high upon a cross, hated for the Truth that He is, beaten, wounded, and nailed to that wood. He came to cry out, "It is finished!" He came to die and enter a tomb. But Truth cannot be held back by anything, even by death.

The message of the resurrection continues to break the silence of every evil time. It breaks through the silence that would condemn us all with the astounding news that because He lives, we too shall live.

Listen for the voice that breaks the silence of your own life. Our Lord Himself confronts our silence with the cross, and the Holy Spirit delivers the blessings of that cross through the Word and the blessed Sacraments. Hear Jesus speak in the words spoken over you, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Hear Jesus speak as you kneel at the altar and receive Him in the elements of the Holy Supper, "Given for you...Shed for you." He speaks to you and to me and He tells us that His life is our life, His peace is our peace, His perfection is our perfection. Silence can be deadly, but Jesus breaks the silence. Hear Him speak to you in the words of the Holy Absolution, "I forgive you for all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen