

“Disarming Silence”
September 19, 2021

Ezekiel 18:30-32
John 7:53-8:11

What is it like when Iowan’s disagree?

The residents of River City described it this way to Professor Harold Hill near the opening of *The Music Man*:

“And we’re so by God stubborn we can stand touchin’ noses
For a week at a time and never see eye to eye.”

And you know what they mean, don’t you?

So much for “Iowa nice.”

Most of us have lived in or traveled to enough other places to know that it’s not just Iowans who possess this charming quality. We live in a nation that is increasingly characterized by political division and culture wars. In recent years friends have been lost and families have been torn apart because we don’t see eye to eye.

We’re left wondering: “How can someone be so boneheaded that they won’t get vaccinated?”

Family members ask: “How can you be so deluded that you can’t see that the election was stolen?”

Stubborn? Yes.

Aggravating? Yes.

Frustrating? Yes.

And a cause of great sorrow when we can no longer talk to one another.

How, then, might we learn to talk together once more?

How might we bridge the great chasm of understanding between us?

How might we find healthy ways of dealing with different opinions and outright conflict?

Today, and in the coming Sundays, I want to explore some possibilities based on some Gospel stories of how Jesus interacted with his opponents. No single method is fitting for every situation. But from these stories we might develop a repertoire of skills. We will see various approaches including listening, questioning, and outright confrontation—as well as what we encountered in this morning’s reading from the Gospel of John: silence.

The silence of Jesus is not simply a matter of “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” Jesus, who called his opponents “snakes” and “whited sepulchers,” was never one to mince words or to keep his opinions to himself. But he seemed to know that, as Ecclesiastes suggests, that there is a time to speak and a time to keep silent.

John tells us about some scribes and Pharisees—good religious leaders in their community. They try to do the right thing. They keep an eye out for anyone who would sin against God. As I’ve told you before: anytime you see the word “Pharisee” in your Bible, just substitute “Congregationalist” and you’ll have a decent translation.

The flaws of other people are always so painfully obvious, aren’t they? And good, religious people like you and me seem to be blessed with a special ability to detect what is wrong with someone else, don’t we?

So it is that the religious people find Jesus teaching in the temple. They bring to him a woman “caught in the very act of committing adultery.” Now, it seems questionable that they bring only the woman since, you know, it does take *two* to tango. And by the Law of Moses the man would be equally guilty. But then we’re rarely consistent in our accusations of others.

Our judgments can be quick and capricious. And often it is like Jesus said: trying to remove a speck in someone else’s eye while there is a log in our own. It’s ridiculous. One of the “down sides” of the life of faith is that, whoever they are, the faithful can be so ready to condemn.

It’s easy, isn’t it, to see the flaws in others. What we lack is self-understanding.

When the self-righteous encounter Jesus there is a sudden silence.

The angry mob has made its accusations. They want a decision from Jesus. From early morning he had been teaching in the temple.

Now the teacher is silent.

Look at him.

Before this angry crowd, Jesus quietly bends down and writes with his finger on the ground.

Look closely in this silence. What do the letters say? Can you make out the words?

For two thousand years people have guessed at what Jesus wrote.

A judge of that time would first write down the sentence and then read it. Did Jesus write the words that he then spoke?

Some suggest he wrote down the sins of each of the accusers. A neat trick—quietly listing the lapses of the self-righteous.

Or maybe Jesus just doodled—a common practice while thinking. Perhaps to withhold his anger toward the religious leaders he simply paused, bent over, and drew on the ground—somewhat like counting to ten.

Look and listen.

The crowd stands waiting for an answer.

Silence.

Jesus bends down writing.

Silence.

The trap has been set: If Jesus lets the woman go, he will violate the law of God given to Moses. If he consents to the stoning he will be in trouble with the Roman authorities—the only ones who could lawfully authorize an execution and the ones who would later authorize his execution.

Before all of us, in silence, Jesus stoops down and writes. In doing so he indicates his refusal to engage the question as it was put to him. As is always the case, Jesus is in control. He will not be put into a corner.

Finally, Jesus breaks the silence.

He straightens up and says: “Let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone at her.”

Just when we think that we’ve found someone to condemn, we find ourselves unable to stand before God. In one sentence Jesus gathers up the sad past—things done and things left undone—and subjects it to God’s judgment and grace.

It *was* a trap. The religious leaders dug it themselves and then fell right into it. Paul reminded the early Christians that “in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself.” But was he talking to us?

Look around. There we are, down in the pit with the scribes, the Pharisees, and everyone else.

How small the distance is between what we dislike and want to see changed, on the one hand, and what is right there within ourselves, all too unrecognized, on the other.¹

The words of Jesus bring us to the moment of recognition, when each one of us sees ourselves for what we are—flawed, finite, yes, *sinful* men and women before God. It’s not just a woman “caught in the very act” but all who would accuse, judge, and condemn—all who are certain that their lives are just fine, thank you.

In the face of such knowledge, we would despair if not for what happens next.

Jesus stoops down to write again.

Silence.

Slowly he stands up.

Silence.

Jesus is alone with the accused. He speaks to her as a social and a human equal. While his words to the Pharisees spoke of their lives lived up to this point, now Jesus speaks of the future—a way to live from now on: “Go your way and do not sin again.”

The grace and mercy of God is offered to all—to scribes and Pharisees, to the unnamed woman,² to anti-vaxxers and anti-Trumpers, to you and me. All are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life.

The word that Jesus speaks to this woman out of silence is spoken to all people. And to all of us comes the promise of freedom for the future. But they hear it best who recognize their separation from God, their antagonism with their neighbors, even their alienation from themselves—that is those who recognize their own sin.

In that recognition we can return to God and move forward.

That recognition of our own sinfulness and of God’s mercy frees us from constantly looking around to accuse, judge, or condemn others. The genius of Congregationalism is that it called each person *as an individual* to be accountable for his or her relationship with God. In that sense we are to be more concerned with ourselves than our neighbors.

In that freedom we are called to live responsibly in the world, forgiving others as we have been forgiven, showing mercy because God has been merciful toward us, giving because God has been generous toward us.

Through silence we might disarm others with all of their attacks, all of their judgments, all of their wrong-headed ideas. By God’s grace, through silence we might also disarm ourselves.

That way, when we stand touching noses, if we don’t see eye to eye, we might at least discover we are looking into the eyes of an image of God.

¹ Robert Coles, *Harvard Diary*, pg. 169.

² *Women’s Bible Commentary*, John