

## But They Were Silent

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20 (25) B, September 19, 2021

“The road to hell,” we noted last week, “is paved with good intentions.” We note this week that it can also be paved with bad intentions, as today’s gospel reveals.

Jesus’s enigmatic insistence that no-one tell anyone who he is continues. Peter, no doubt chastened by having set his mind on human things and not divine things, has gone silent as the grave. Earlier in this chapter, he also seems to have missed the point about the transfiguration, wanting not to come down from that mountain on which was revealed the glory of the Lord. But come down he did, and silent he became, as everyone else in the group starts making a new mistake.

“Who among us is the greatest?” they begin to ask one another, trying unsuccessfully to do it quietly so that Jesus can’t hear, especially once the answers turn into arguments. Why would they do a thing like that? “Men,” said some of the women I know when I put this question to them. “They were men; men do that.” But, as they were quick to note, women do it, too, and many an adolescent of any gender, so maybe it’s just a human thing. What isn’t, that we do uniquely wrong? Was it Mark Twain who once quipped that human beings were the only creature among all the animals who blushed, or needed to? But having to tell who is the greatest, or (as some translations have it) the chiefest, is a feature or flaw that we share with other herd and social animals from horses to primates to dolphins. We appear to have to figure out who’s on top and where we fit in the pecking order, and who may peck whom, in order for us to get anything done with a minimum of fuss or violence. Even the cats my wife and I have at home have to do this, though there are only two of them, and they have been together since birth. Siblings or no, they still must hash it out from time to time who gets to eat the fish paté first, who gets the cardboard

box tonight to nap in and who the hardwood chair, and whose turn it is to wake up Mummy and Daddy at 5 am to give them more fish paté. “Can’t we all just get along?” appears to be a question we can answer in the affirmative only once we’ve worked out who gets to say so, and why, and what penalties they can invoke if it turns out we can’t, at least not without being made to. None of us particularly likes to be told to “Remember our place,” but we would feel quite at sea if we couldn’t actually remember what it was.

I do wonder what prompted it. Were some of them worried that Jesus spent more time with the others, maybe took Thomas and Mary aside too often for their private discourses? Were those who didn’t get to go up the mountain and see Jesus transfigured into Christ in all his glory, along with Moses and Elijah, feeling a bit left out, left behind? Were they fussed that Judas Iscariot got to keep hold of the money, or that only Peter got favored with high praise – “On this rock I will build my church” – if also with high blame – “Get thee behind me, Satan” and all? Were they concerned that James or Bartholomew could heal better than they, or that Andrew and Levi were better at explaining things, or that whoever it was got to sit next to Jesus when they had a meal, or that he’d asked this one to fetch his sandals or that one to go get him a cup of water? We don’t know. We only know that they argued about it and didn’t want him to hear, but he heard anyway.

I am blessed, or it may be cursed, with pretty good hearing. I may not always understand what someone says to me, but I often hear it if it’s audible. Sometimes, with such a gift, I hear things I’m not necessarily meant to, things whispered in a corner, in a nearby room, or between people sitting at a desk thinking they’ve covered their mouths. It is always interesting to face the decision about what to do with something one has heard and now cannot un-hear, even if it might have been better for all concerned had one not heard at all.

One can, of course, pretend that one didn't. From time to time we do this. One can blurt out a response or a rejoinder, and from time to time we do that, too. One can offer a quiet correction to a mis-statement of fact or intent, or make a joke out of it, or by way of reminding people that one has, in fact, been blessed with good hearing and "can hear you all the way over there, you know." One can, that is, trigger embarrassment or conflict or shame, do nothing, or do what Jesus did: ask an open-ended question and see what they make of it. "What were y'all arguing about, back there on the road?" he asks. I get the feeling that he already had a pretty good idea, and I get the feeling that they did, too.

Which is why they say nothing. That is often the safest course when caught doing something one oughtn't have done. Say nothing; see what they got on you, first. Any you do say can be used against you in a court of law, of public opinion, of private judgment, or all three.

It's also the safest course when saying the wrong thing can get you killed. Those who dwell in places riven with conflict know this better than anyone. The Irish poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney articulated it in a famous poem about the Troubles in Northern Ireland: "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing." In the third section, lamenting how impossible the people of Northern Ireland found it to move beyond the divisions foisted on them, which they mostly despised, Heaney writes:

#### The famous

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place  
And times: yes, yes. Of the 'wee six' I sing  
Where to be saved you only must save face  
And whatever you say, you say nothing.

Fear guards, and wisdom guides, the wary tongue. If I never tell you what I'm thinking, you cannot use it against me, and if I speak in a way that means I am not

humiliated, I just might live to see another sunrise. Empty your words of meaning, turn a sneer into a snicker, figure out who is who by where they live or what their name is – is this a friend or an enemy? If you're not one, you're the other. – Heaney calls that place a “land of password, handgrip, wink and nod, / Of open minds as open as a trap...”<sup>1</sup> Where violence is only as far away a missed wink or handgrip gone wrong, one cannot afford to be generous, understanding, tolerant, or humane – just human, in the worse sense: that of any other frightened animal reduced to its instincts to survive. Fear rots, and wisdom flies, the wary mind.

Jesus and his disciples do not live in the bucolic hellscape that was Heaney's 'wee six', but their world was bad enough. Where there are swords, there is blood, as the saying goes, and where there are things to buy, there are many who would much rather steal – not to mention the power and vainglory that was provincial Rome. The natural course of these people's lives under such conditions were so far from what Jesus knew they could and should be that it sometimes left even him at a loss for words. Yet not here. He has to shock their minds away from hierarchies, competitiveness, and the violence they entail, un-set the open traps of their minds so that they spring free of them, be full of generosity and compassion because so few in their world could afford to be, or so they thought. So he gives them a mystery to ponder, and sets it in indelible imagery: “Who would be first, be last. Put yourself at the end of the line, serve others before you serve yourself. Don't make it all about you, but about everybody else.” What would that look like? “He took a little child,” the gospel says, “and put it among them”. If you want to be great, if you want to be at the top, make your world and this world truly welcoming to children. Make it somewhere that it is safe for them to be, and where they need have no fear, never have to guess which other child, or adult, is out to get them because they are of a

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://allpoetry.com/poem/11014161-from-Whatever-You-Say-Say-Nothing-by-Seamus-Heaney>.  
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different group or tribe, *ethnos* or religion, or whatever it is that causes children to be hurt, and adults to hurt them, cage them, mis-educate them, turn them into compliant worker bees, or ignore their pleas for help and cries of pain. You want to be great? You wonder which of you is the greatest? Whoever among you has done the most to make life better for those who will come after us and will have to deal with whatever it is we leave behind.

One could at this point list a long but useless lament for all the ills of the world that we, collectively, are not fixing. Doing so might feel good, but I do not think it that it would do much good, and if it does not do much good, how could it be the path of wisdom? Whatever we say thus about those things about which we can do nothing, I fear we say nothing, but wallow in helpless rage at human folly or the pleasing misery of being right about all the things about which no-one listens to us, even though they should. I turn, instead, to the words from the Epistle of James, which reminds us to show our wisdom by doing what we do with the gentleness that wisdom bears. Heal the hurts of our world without bitter envy and without selfish ambition. Be pure as we do so, and not selfish or indulgent. Be people who sow peace, as a sower sows grain, and reaps from it a harvest of righteousness. Be willing to yield, and full of mercy. It may be that going about the world in that spirit will show us what, in any instance, we need to do to truly makes this a world worth welcoming children to, and with them, the God who made it good, and made us for it, also good.

Also: pay attention, and graciousness encourage others to pay attention to what is, and what it means. Heaney, like any artist worthy the name, did so. “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing” ends not with a loud burst of righteous anger against all who had riven his land with conflict and death, but a concentrated poetic observation all the more powerful because it bears witness to that riving with a clarity and lament that

enables his hearers and readers to set their own frame around it, unspringing the traps in their own mind and opening themselves to respond freely to what is:

#### IV

This morning from the dewy motorway  
I saw the new camp for the internees:  
A bomb had left a crater of fresh clay  
In the roadside, and over in the trees

Machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.  
There was that white mist you get on a low ground  
And it was *deja-vu*, some film made  
of Stalag 17, a bad dream with no sound.

Is there a life before death? That's chalked up  
In Ballymurphy. Competence with pain,  
Coherent mistress, a bite and sup,  
We hug our little destiny again.

“We hug our little destiny again.” Hold close what we must endure, and the reasons why. Welcome it as Christ said to do a child, though much of this world really is no place for children. Learn why. Tell other people. Then do what you can to make it better, to make it as it should be.

*Amen.*