

## Practicing Silence

*“When we make a place for silence, we make room for ourselves. By making room for silence, we resist the forces of the world which tell us to live an advertised life of surface appearances, instead of a discovered life – a life lived in contact with our senses, our feelings, our deepest thoughts and values.” Gunilla Norris*



Silence is a needed ingredient of our lives if we hope to deepen our intimacy with God. Yet silence is difficult for most people. It can make us feel helpless, fearful, and vulnerable. We rely on words to manage, control, manipulate and protect, and in silence that is all taken away from us. Also the whole of our culture mitigates against

embracing silence as a friend. Wherever we go there is noise: the coffee shop, the store, the elevator...even in churches there is little if any silence. We have been trained to be comfortable with noise and ill at ease with silence.

God tells us through the Psalmist, “Be still and know I am God (Psalm 46:10), through Isaiah, “...in repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (Isaiah 30:15) and through Moses, “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still”(Exodus 14:14).

Henri Nouwen writes, “There was a time when silence was normal and a lot of racket disturbed us. But today, noise is the normal fare, and silence, strange as it may seem, has become the real disturbance.”

The noise of our world has become a way of separating us from ourselves and from God. The continual noise does not let us hear what is going on deep within. As a result we live unexamined lives. We live lives where there is no depth.

Silence helps to create space in your busy life for God. Silence prepares you to hear the words of God. Thus silence is not the end but a vehicle for paying attention to God. It calls you to be present in the moment...to show up and place yourself in the way of God. God is always present but you are not always present to God...silence enables you to be present to God.

God is the friend of silence. And as you embrace silence something unexpected happens. This very personal and intimate spiritual discipline takes on a communal reality. This is seen in the words of Mother Teresa, "The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we care in our active life. We need silence to touch souls." Thus silence is not merely about your own spiritual development but enables you to be Jesus to others as well.

But how does one begin to embrace internal silence? Absence of words is one of the tools with which we create silence. Stillness of body and discipline of mental activity are among the several other tools. But it is not easy.

For when the outer world is quiet, we begin to hear our inner noise. Our heads are filled with chatter; ...in the silence we begin to realize that we are everywhere but here."

Theophane the Recluse notes, "Thoughts continue to jostle in your mind like mosquitoes."

Henri Nouwen notes, "It is so hard to be silent, silent with my mouth, but even more, silent with my heart. There is so much talking going on within me. It seems that I am always involved in inner debates with my friends, my enemies, my supporters, my opponents my colleagues, my rivals, and myself. But this inner debate reveals how far my heart is from You."

In a very real sense, silence can be very unsettling because when the noise of the world ceases, you begin to hear your own inner voice. This can make silence a scary

place. J. Vennard writes, "We long for silence and yet we are afraid of silence. For when the outer world is quiet, we begin to hear our inner

noise. Our heads are filled with chatter; ...in the silence we begin to realize that we are everywhere but here.”

Before you proceed take a moment to explore with God your attitude toward silence. Seek to discover any pre-existing internal barriers that may hinder you from being able to fully give yourself to the discipline of silence. Silence is an important element to your life with God. It is worth the time to begin to identify and deal with possible negative attitudes toward silence. Take a couple moments to work through the following questions:

- When you think of being silent what feelings, thoughts, images arise within you?
- Was there ever a time in your life when you experience silence as a gift...what was that like? What were the positive results that came from that time?
- Do you long for more silence (be honest with yourself)? If not, why are you resistant to silence?
- What frightens you about being silent with yourself...being silent with God?
- If so, where and when do you long for more silence in your life?
- What is the difference for you between silence alone and silence in a group?
- What can be the benefits of being silent with God?

Silence can be a difficult discipline but it is well worth the time and effort to develop. Silence enables us to hear ourselves and God. Silence can help us to be Jesus to others. Being still before God leads to personal transformation and Christ likeness.

Start small and build upon your experiences of silence.

The incredible thing is this...after a time, silence no longer happens in a physical place but becomes a portable, internal space of noticing God's presence that we carry with us throughout our days. Thomas Kelly tells us, "If we learn the secret of carrying a living silence in the center of our being we can listen (to God) on the run. The listening silence can become intertwined with all our inward prayers. A few moments of relaxed silence, alone, everyday are desperately important."

May you train yourself to value, pursue and welcome silence.