

When God Says Nothing

Matthew 15:21-28

RADM Barry C. Black, Chaplain, U.S. Senate
Sunday, May 24, 2009
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Speak, Lord, for we are listening. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, I want to talk to you today about dealing with the silence of God. We all know what to do when God says "Yes." We even know what to do when God says "No." The great challenge for many of us is what to do when God says nothing.

Memorial Day is a time to remember those who gave their last full measure of devotion for country. It is also a time when old wounds are open. It's a time when people who continue to wrestle with issues of theodicy are reminded of the silence of God.

I have stood on the decks of aircraft carriers, of destroyers and amphibious vessels, as sailors and Marines prepare to go into battle. I have watched as uplifted faces with earnest expressions seem to be saying to me "Chaplain, what if I am not alive when the sun sets on tomorrow? What can you tell me that will make a difference?" I've had to go to relatives to inform them that their loved one was killed in combat. And many of these people cry out to God, and he answers them not a word. And they have the challenge of trying to learn to deal with the silence of God.

In our Scripture lesson, we encounter a woman who had to deal with the silence of God. Matthew, chapter 15, beginning with verse 21: "Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.' And he answered her not a word."

I love it when God says "Yes" to me; it makes me feel like I'm special. I don't even mind when he says "No" because I trust his omniscience. He is all wise. When I was growing up, I was about nine years of age, I overheard my mother talking about one of the deacons in the church. She said, "He makes big money." And I kept my antenna up so that I could hear what the figure was, and eventually she said it, "He makes \$100 a week." I went to my bedroom; it was time to go to sleep and I did not pray my usual, "Now I lay me down to sleep." I prayed a sincere prayer, "Lord, Master of the universe, if you will grant this request, I will never ask you for anything else for as long as I live. If you will let me one day grow up and make \$100 a week, you will never hear another petition from my lips." Aren't you glad God does not always say "Yes" to our prayers? Had he done so, I would not be able to fill up my gas tank today. He had kept me out of the \$100 a week.

In the 11th grade, I was at a boarding academy in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, I walked across the campus and I saw a young woman. I was in... I had an English literature class and for some reason when I saw her, the words of Christopher Marlowe's "Faustus"¹ leapt to mind, "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships? O Helen, by thy beauty I'm enthralled. Thou art fairer than the evening air clad in the beauty of a thousand stars." I went back to my room and fell on my knees. And since I had not yet been granted the previous petition, I prayed, "Lord, God of the universe, if you will grant this request, I will never ask you for anything else for as long as I live. I saw a damsel today..." (see, my mother had us memorizing the King James Version, so) "...I saw a damsel today. I felt something beautiful in my heart and if somehow you can let her feel what I feel, so that together, we will traverse the seasons, I will never ask you for anything else for as long as I live." Well God said "No." And about ten years ago, I was preaching at a church and I saw that woman and I said, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Tears of joy were streaming down my face and people said, "He's under the influence of the Holy Spirit;" they did not know I thanked him.

So we don't mind "Yes" and we don't mind "No;" it is when he says nothing that we go through what F.

Scott Fitzgerald called the “dark night of the soul.”² Now, let’s face it, sometimes he says nothing because of our sins. Isaiah chapter 59, verses 1 and 2 says, “The Lord’s arm is not short that He cannot reach you; His ears are not heavy that He cannot hear. Your iniquities have come between you and God.” Like Saul, in First Samuel chapter 28, seeking answers because of the silence of God from a Witch of Endor. God is silent because of our transgression. Sometimes he’s silent because we are not ready to hear what he has to say.

In John, chapter 16, verse 12 (Jesus is speaking to his disciples in his farewell discourse), he said, “There are many things I want to tell you, but you are not ready to hear them yet.” Sometimes God is silent because we do not have the proper motives. James, chapter 4, verse 3 says, “You ask and you don’t receive because you ask amiss that you might spend it on your own pleasures.” Sometimes, God is silent because of our lack of faith. We’re like the disciples, in Matthew, chapter 17, trying unsuccessfully to cast out a demon, to exorcise a demon from this boy. And they couldn’t. Later, they came to Jesus and said, “Why was God silent? What happened?” And Jesus, our Blessed Lord, said, “It was because of your lack of faith. It was because of your unbelief.”

I am so glad that this Canaanite woman had a prepossessing faith; it is indeed a great faith. Our Blessed Lord says, “Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour. This woman teaches us how to deal with the silence of God. How do you do it? First, let love be your motivation. Many times God is silent because of the selfish nature of our prayers. This woman comes to Jesus not to get something for herself, but to get something for her daughter. Love was the motivation.

My father was an alcoholic. He was not around very often. My then, four siblings, and I were taught to pray for my father. And every day my mother, who was the greatest Christian I have ever known, would put words into our little mouths. She would say, “Now, you repeat after me.” And we would repeat like a voice choir, “Dear Jesus, dear Jesus, please help Daddy. Please help Daddy to stop drinking, to stop drinking.” I prayed that prayer through elementary school, and God said nothing. I prayed it through junior high school, and God answered me not a word. When I reached the 11th grade, I stopped praying that prayer. I said, “I’ll let my mother pray it. I’m still going to pray but I’m not going to pray for something that God has obviously decided not to do anything about.”

I was studying theology in college, but I would not pray for my father. I prayed for the pygmies in Africa. I prayed for the lepers in Calcutta. I prayed for everyone, but I would not pray for my father. I couldn’t deal with the silence of God. Well, God has a sense of humor. I came home from college and they said, “Oh, you’re studying theology, why don’t you preach at a church in Baltimore, Berea Temple?” Of 1500 people I was preaching to, terrified by the experience with preaching and finally, at the end of the sermon, I made an invitation to discipleship: “For those who had never asked Jesus to be Lord of their lives, to do that.” And to my amazement, dressed very informally, in coveralls, who should come down the aisle but my alcoholic father. It was one of the few times I have experienced ambivalence at seeing someone come to Christ. “What in the world is going on here? And why doesn’t he have a tie?” My father, under the power of God’s anointing, put down the bottle without any kind of alcohol rehab or all the sophisticated stuff we do today, and never picked it up again because God ended his silence and used the very individual who had become too abstinent and arrogant to intercede for his father as a vehicle to draw his father to Jesus Christ. Let love be your motivation. My mother never stopped praying and God honored her prayer.

If you’re going to deal with the silence of God, let love be your motivation. But also, my friends, if you’re going to deal with his silence, know that he is listening even when he doesn’t speak. David said in the 139th Psalm, “How can I flee from your spirit? If I ascend into heaven, you’re there. If I make my bed in hell, you’re there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there, your right hand will uphold me.” God is listening even when he doesn’t speak.

You remember the story of Mary and Martha; Lazarus is sick in John, chapter 11. Jesus is not in Bethany where they live, and so they send word to Jesus by a messenger: “The one whom you love is sick.” They know that Jesus will know what to do. In verse 4 of John chapter 11, Jesus says to the messengers, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God.” And the messenger scurries away with the great news to Mary and Martha: “Don’t worry about a thing. The Lord of Life said he will live.” As Lazarus’ condition

deteriorates, no doubt, they are encouraging him, "The Master said you're going to be all right. This sickness is not unto death." And they probably greeted the news of Lazarus' death with incredulity. "It can't be. The Master said he is not going to die." And where is Jesus now? He's silent. He answers them not a word. "Surely he will be at the funeral." He's not there. He says absolutely nothing. But you and I know that he knew what was going on all along. He is listening even when he doesn't speak. He shows up after Lazarus has been dead for days. You can imagine, Mary and Martha probably have a little bit of an attitude. Mary who sat at his feet, she doesn't even go out to greet him. Martha does.

And let me tell you, we are too hard on Martha. You know, how we tell the story of Mary and Martha in Luke, chapter 10? Martha was in the kitchen cooking the collard greens, the fried chicken and the... (that's what it says in the Greek!) and fried chicken and the... (gotta know biblical languages, ladies and gentlemen). So she's cooking the collard greens, and the cornbread, and the fried chicken, and Mary would sit at his feet. And we celebrate Mary. And Martha comes out with amazing words; she says to him--not as a chastisement but as affirmation--"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But then she continues, "But I know that even now, anything you ask of God, he will give it to you." The silence would soon be broken as our Blessed Lord stands at the sepulcher and speaks three simple words: "Lazarus, come forth." The words roll from his lips and float along the ethereal waves into the darkened sepulcher, and commingled with inanimate clay, and life springs anew in the breast of a dead man because the Lord of Life said, "Get up." He had been silent, but now he is speaking in his undeniably omnipotent way.

Know that he is listening even when he doesn't speak. He said to Moses after 400 years-- his people were in slavery and he'd said nothing-- he said to Moses at the burning bush, "I've heard them. I've seen what their oppressors have done. Go down into Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let my people go." When God says nothing, let love be your motivation. When God says nothing, know that he is listening. When God says nothing, find answers in his holy word.

The first Psalm says, "Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, the word of God. And in that law, he meditates day and night." How often during the week do you meditate on Scripture? There are answers in God's word. Why? John, chapter 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Verse 14, "And the Word was made flesh." Jesus is the Word. We find his voice in the Word.

This Canaanite woman heard him speak. He first continues his silence toward her but he speaks to his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." It is possible to infer from that that he is on a messianic timetable. You see, she knows about the Messiah. She uses a messianic designation: "Lord, Son of David," as a messianic designation, "have mercy on me." "Sent only to the lost sheep of the household of Israel", in a sense saying, 'Don't push me from my timetable.' He was saying, to some extent, what he said to his mother in John, chapter 2, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee: "My time is not yet, Mama" (in the Greek, again) "My time is not yet." And yet Mary had come to him because, let's face it, oriental hospitality requires that refreshments would be served and Mary was basically, at least implying, "If you hadn't brought all these uninvited guests here guzzling the wine"--Peter taking three and four hits-- "maybe we wouldn't had have run out." So she was kind of, you know. And he said, "Woman, No. Don't push it now." But she says, "Whatever he says to do, do it."

This woman found some answers, this Canaanite woman. First, "I am sent only to the lost sheep of the household of Israel." And then our Blessed Lord says something to her that sounds startling, he says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." This woman knows who she is in Jesus Christ. And with a prepossessing smile, she responds to this ostensibly abrupt and almost rude declamation from our Lord. "Yes, Lord. But even"--the Greek says "puppies"--"the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She had found her answer in his Word.

When God is silent, I challenge you to find a contemporary version of the Bible and just start reading through it meditatively. The Psalms are powerful. Every human emotion is touched by the Psalms. The Gospels are illuminating-- four biographies of our Blessed Lord. I will tell you from personal experience,

you will not be able to do that repeatedly and prayerfully and not eventually hear from God.

But the reality is, my sisters and brothers, Jesus is in every part of the Word. He said in John, chapter 5, verse 39, "Search the Scriptures; for in them, you think you have eternal life, and these are they which testify of me." In Genesis, he's "Shiloh"; in Exodus, he's the "I Am"; in Numbers, he's the "Star and Scepter"; in Deuteronomy, he's the "Rock"; in Joshua, he's "Captain of the Lord's host"; in Psalms, he's the "Great Shepherd"; in Proverbs, he's the "Beloved." I heard Isaiah call him "Wonderful Counselor." Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 6, "The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." Micah said, "He is the one whose going forth of old is from everlasting to everlasting." Zachariah called him the "Branch"; Malachi called him the "Messenger of the Covenant." You cannot expose yourself repeatedly to God's Word and not have him break the silence. Matthew said "Savior"; Mark said "Son of Man"; Luke said "The Great Physician"; John said "The Word made flesh." Acts said, "He is the one who empowers you to witness." Philippians says, "He is the name above every name and one day at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord to the glory of God, the Father." First Thessalonians says, "He is the One who will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise." Hebrews says, "He's the great High Priest, touched with the feelings of our infirmities, in all points tempted like us, yet without sin." Jude says, "He is able to keep you without stumbling or slipping and to present you without fault or blemish before the presence of His glory with unspeakable ecstatic delight in triumphant joy and exaltation." In Revelation, John, a prisoner on the Isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea said, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day. I saw him high and lifted up in my solitary place. He is Alpha, he is Omega, he is Beginning, he is Ending, he is Author, he is Finisher, he is King of kings and Lord of lords."

For some of you, Memorial Day may mean opening old wounds and dealing again with the questions of "Why?" For some of you, this may be a time when you must again deal with the silence of God. Keep the lines of communication open. Let love be your motivation. Like that Syro-Phoenician woman who gives us this great example, know that God is listening even when he doesn't speak. Learn from this Canaanite woman to listen to the words of Christ revealed in his sacred Book. And what you will discover is: weeping may endure for a night but joy will come in the morning.

1 Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, 1592. *Doctor Faustus*, published in 1604.

2 Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Crack-Up*. (collection of essays published in 1936). New Directions, 1945.

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