Sunday, April 28, 1985
TOO SOON AND TOO MUCH
Ecclesiastes 3:1-9; John 16:12-15

When to speak? How much to say? And when to keep silent? These are difficult lessons for all of us to learn, and even more difficult to practice. Usually, we find ourselves speaking too soon and saying too much. We have lots of advice to give. Somewhere along the way, Jesus learned when to speak and when to keep silent. No doubt he knew what the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes had advised — "There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak." Jesus also knew when he had said enough. In the passage read earlier from the Gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." He made this revealing statement to them near the end of what Biblical scholars call "His farewell discourses. "There were some things the disciples were not ready to hear and some things.

We are not ready to hear and some things that others are not ready to hear even though we want to tell them. We can speak too soon and say too much. In another incident recorded in the Gospel of John, a woman had been brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees, because she had been caught in adultery. They wanted to test Jesus, so they asked, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery."

Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" Jesus did not answer them immediately. Rather, the Bible reports that he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Then after what must´ve seemed like a long period of silence, and after they had asked him again what he thought about the case, he finally stood up, looked them straight in the eye and said, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Silence!

But when they heard what he had to say - they went away one by one and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Only then did he speak again. And he spoke gently and asked, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" no doubt there were a lot of things Jesus could´ve said to the woman at this point, but as was the case with his disciples — he knew she could not bear it now — so all he said was, "Neither do I condemn you — go and do not sin again."

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Let´s look more carefully this morning at the wisdom of Jesus´ statement so that we do not speak too soon and say too much. We want to look also at the wisdom of silence as a contrast to speaking and what this can mean - not only in our day-to-day relationship with one another, but in our relationship with God.

What did Jesus mean when he said that his disciples could not bear some of what he had to say, if he said it then?

He knew that words spoken at the wrong time, before people are ready for them are more easily not heard at all or are misunderstood, or worse, still place a heavy burden on people which they are not capable of carrying - and thus with our speaking, we can do more harm than good. Waiting for the right time to speak is waiting for the "Teachable moment." A poor teacher, for example, might overwhelm us with an avalanche of facts which we cannot yet assimilate, or for which there has been no preparation.

No doubt this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Patiently, and moderating his pace to theirs, Jesus leads his disciples on bit by bit, here a little and there a little, as they can follow.

The Christian life even now is something like that. It is often a gradual growth and training a wading deeper and deeper into the truth. To walk with Christ means that every turn on the way opens new views and vistas to us, and we assimilate themed grow and mature. To be born again is only a beginning. One needs to continue to grow and seek new truths.

In our day-to-day relationships with each other, it´s so easy for us to speak too soon and say too much. As I look back, I´m sure that as a parent as my children were growing up, I often spoke too soon, that is, had quick advice to give and then too much advice as well. Most of the time my children were not asking for advice, but for understanding. Now as a grandparent, I know it´s especially important that I not speak too soon and give advice to my daughter and son-in-law. Again, what they need is not advice, but understanding. I need to remember the words of Jesus, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” What I have to say may be valuable in my estimation, but those to whom it is directed cannot bear it now. Recently I came across this suggestion about when to speak and when to keep silent in our human relationships. Before you speak, ask yourself: (1) Do I really have something to say? (2) Does anyone wish to hear it? (3) Is this the right time to say it? If the answer to even one of these questions is ”No,” keep silent. The self-centered habit of inflicting stories or opinions on people who often aren´t interested in hearing them, and then unconsciously speeding up the face of their growing boredom. ”But people are usually interested in what I must say, “You might argue. I can only suggest that the next time you find yourself relating to some incident that seems to you interesting or important, you excuse yourself to go to the bathroom before coming to the point. Then when you return, keep silent and see whether anyone asks you to pick up were you had left off. Don´t be angry if no one does. This matter of when to speak and when to keep silent relates to us on a deeper level.

Recently I came across a metaphor which helped me understand the relationship of silence to speaking. The metaphor is that of a shadow. Anne Dillard, in her book, ”Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,” tells the story of an early cataract surgery, saying that form, distance and size were so many meaningless syllables for the newly sighted. When a newly sighted girl saw photographs and paintings, she asked, “Why do they put those dark marks all over them? Those aren´t dark marks,” said her mother, “Those are shadows.” That is one of the ways the eye knows that things have shape. If it were not for shadows many things would look Flat.”

In much the same way as shadow provides shape, silence offers dimension and depth to words. Words become real when they are bordered by silence. Periods of silence provide shadows and outlines which give our words perspective and depth. Jesus used silence in this way when responding to those who asked him what should be done with the woman caught in adultery. There are times when not speaking, when silence can communicate more than any words we might use. When to speak and when to keep silent — that´s not always easy to learn or to put into practice.

A young minister wrote about this. In his second year of ministry at his first church, the organist, a woman named Joselyn became ill. Not long after, it was diagnosed as cancer. A few months later the cancer had metastasized dramatically. Soon she was dying. She was forty-seven years old. During these months, the young minister regularly visited her in the hospital. He didn´t know what to say, nor did he understand what he had the right to say. He

wrote out the Psalms. Psalms were safe. He prayed often that God´s will be done, scared to guess what God´s will might be.

One day when she awoke from surgery, he determined to be cheerful, to enliven her and to avoid the specters that unsettled him — her impending death. He chattered, he spoke brightly of the summer outside, and vigorously of the tennis he had played that morning, sweetly of the flowers, hopefully of the day when she would sit again at the organ, reading music during his sermon.

But Joselyn Rolled a black eye his away. She Raised one bony finger to his face. And She said, “Shut up!”

The minister said later, “God help me! - I learned so slowly. But God in Joselyn taught me an unutterable patience. I, who had thought to give her the world she did not have, was in fact taking away the only world she did have. I had been canceling her serious, noble, faithful and dignified dance with death. I shut up. I learned.” He kept visiting her. He earned his citizenship. And then the autumn whitened into winter, and Joselyn became no more than bones, her rich skin turned ashy, her breath filled the room with a close odor which ever thereafter meant dying to his nostrils.

And the day came when he had nothing, absolutely nothing to say to Joselyn. He entered her room at noon, saying nothing. He sat beside her through the afternoon, until the sun had slanted into darkness, saying nothing. She lay awake, her eyelids paper thin and dropping, watchful eyes — neither of them saying anything. The evening took them, and no artificial light went on When the sun went out, but with the evening came the Holly Spirit. For the words he finally said were not his own.

He turned to Joselyn. He opened his mouth and spoke as a Pastor. He spoke too, as a human. He said, “I love you” And Joselyn widened her ebony eye. And that lady, she took out her arms. As a parishioner, I suppose, as a woman, to be sure. She hugged him. And he hugged those dying bones. She whispered, “I love you too.” And that was all they said. And that was all that needed to be said! And she died. As I read this story, I remembered in one of my first parishes a similar, but different situation. I had just returned from a long trip and was met at the airport by the student minister who had been working with me. He said that I needed to go immediately to the hospital because a long-time parishioner with whom I was very close was near death and his wife needed me. When I arrived at the hospital, her husband was in a coma, and within a half hour after I arrived, died.

I didn´t know what to say—-no words seemed Adequate. I put my arms around her shoulders, and we cried together in silence. After a time, only a few words were necessary, and we were both comforted. When to be silent? When to speak? And then what words to say? It´s not always easy to know. Often it´s better to wait than to speak too soon. We can minister to others in silence with our presence.

And this leads us still deeper. In the silence before and after the words, we can know and become more aware of the presence and love of God. The Psalmist wrote, “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10) Sometimes we speak too soon and say too much and in the process block out with our words any awareness of the problems of others. We confuse words with prayer. It is in stillness, in silence, that we are (are often most) receptive to the movement of God. When Elijah, the prophet, rat in fear and hid in a cave — he discovered that God was not in the wind that broke the rocks in pieces, God was not in the earthquake which shook the

mountains, God was not in the fire, but after all this, a great stillness — and then Elijah experienced the presence of God as he had never experienced it before. Do not be afraid of silence, of stillness. Do not be afraid of emptiness. Here we encounter God. Here God fills us. “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Amen.