Sunday, February 21, 1993
A TIME TO BE SILENT AND A TIME TO SPEAK
Matthew 17:1-9

Have you known people who tell you too much, too soon? Not only do they share more than you want to know about their successes, failures, illnesses, and troubles, but they also talk too much about their religious experiences. There's a time to keep silent and a time to speak.

When to speak? How much to say? When to be silent? These are difficult lessons for all of us to learn. There's an old saying that goes, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

Somewhere along the way, Jesus learned when to speak and when to be silent. He took the advice of the writer of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament: "There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak." He also knew when he had said enough — when to stop talking. Thus, at one point near the end of his ministry, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have yet many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." He knew that there were some things the disciples were not yet ready to hear.

In another incident recorded in the Gospel according to John, a woman who had been caught in adultery was brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees. They wanted to test him, so they said, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. 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 have seemed like a long period of silence, and after they had asked him again what his judgment was, 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. And they went away one by one, beginning with the oldest. Only then, with the woman standing before him, did he speak again. And he spoke gently, asking, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

There were a lot of things Jesus could have said to the woman at this point, but as was the case with his disciples, he knew she could not bear them now — so all he said was, "Neither do I condemn you — go, and do not sin again." There's a time to be silent and a time to speak.

Here's another story from the life of Jesus that reminds us that there's a time to be silent and a time to speak. One day, Jesus took with him three of his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, and together they went apart for prayer, for renewing their spiritual strength. Jesus knew the need and value of a regular time for worship and prayer. It is a way of regaining one's perspective, of seeing things in a new light. In today's world, we call it a "reality check." Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, "They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Why only three disciples went with Jesus, we do not know. Maybe only three were invited, or perhaps all were invited and only three accepted the invitation. It's possible that the other nine had not experienced the rewards of a time apart for solitude and prayer. They were men of

action. Prayer can also be dangerous — it can change a person. It is well known that prayer is not for the purpose of changing God but for changing us.

Some people are afraid of being transformed or changed in any way. Suppose through prayer you discover that what you really want out of life is quite different from what you are now doing. You could ascertain that your values are all upside down.

You might even begin to take Jesus' words seriously when he said, "Do not worry about tomorrow," and stop worrying about so many unimportant things. For some people, their worries provide their safe boundaries. Their worries keep them from venturing forth or trying anything the least bit different or risky. Afraid of trusting the promise of an oasis, they defend the merits of the desert. They are afraid of feeling too good.

"The truth is," wrote the newspaper columnist Russell Baker, "I don't feel good most of the time and don't want to. Moreover, I do not comprehend why anyone else should want to. It's perfectly normal not to feel good. In our drawerful of cultural biases is the conviction that unhappiness is the mark of sensitivity and intelligence." Isn't it true that in our society there is a tendency to think of gloomy people as being deep? And on the other hand, there's a tendency to think of happy and optimistic people as being shallow.

It could be, too, that the other nine disciples had been with Jesus at other times when he had gone apart to pray and not much happened. Maybe you've had that experience. We all have our spiritual dry spells. Perhaps you've been here for worship and felt that not much touched you personally. You were only going through the motions. That happens to all of us. Or you've tried prayer somewhere else or at some other time and wondered if it was worth the effort.

There's a certain amount of patience and waiting that is necessary in coming into an awareness of God's spirit in our lives. Life-changing spiritual experiences cannot be manufactured according to a schedule. All we can do is be open to them. Then they occur at surprising and unexpected times.

It's the same with other life experiences. Sometimes a familiar piece of music will deeply move us emotionally, and at other times, nothing much happens. There's an old saying that goes, "When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear."

The three disciples who accompanied Jesus went out of faithfulness and commitment. Their going along signified their openness and readiness. And this time, they weren't disappointed.

Not only did they feel God's spirit among and in them in a fresh way, but they also saw Jesus, their teacher, in a new light. In their vision, they saw him with Moses and Elijah from the Old Testament. It's another way of saying that they saw him as the culmination of both the law and the prophets in Hebrew history. It was a vision of unity and connectedness that they had not experienced before. At the time, it was so overwhelming that they did not understand it. All they could do was stand in awe at the power and glory of God.

And of course, they wanted to hold onto it, to prolong it. Peter put their desire into words: "Let's build three booths so that we can capture Jesus, Moses, and Elijah and keep them this way forever." Here's a familiar temptation: Keep God in a box. Stop where you are. What you now know about God is enough. No need to be open to any deeper experiences.

Then they heard the voice of God as they had never heard it before, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” When Peter, James, and John heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. This Jesus, their teacher and friend, was closer to God than they had ever realized. Only in this moment did they fully realize that Jesus was truly God’s chosen one. It was a terrifying knowledge. Jesus was God in the flesh.

Only Jesus could dispel their fear. He came close and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And as they were coming down the mountain, he gave them another command, “Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

“Tell no one.” Be silent. He was saying, among other things, “You’ve just experienced a mysterious and overpowering vision. You’re not ready to completely understand or comprehend it, so don’t speak about it yet. You’ve still got some spiritual growing to do.” There’s a time to be silent and a time to speak.

I don’t know about you, but it seems to me that Jesus’ counsel to keep quiet takes the pressure off all of us who experience the incomprehensible and inconceivable in our lives. Death, tragedy, disloyalty, surprising experiences of joy and happiness — all are equally beyond our finite understanding of them instantly.

So often these days, specially designed disaster teams of therapists and then news reporters swoop down on individuals, families, or even whole communities that have undergone some trauma or surprising victory and urge everyone to talk about it. Reporters ask too quickly, “What were your feelings?” before anyone has had any time to try to sort out their feelings or emotions. Some things do not make any sense at the time they happen. There are overwhelming experiences, both tragic and joyful, that need to have a period of incubation or germination in our minds and spirits before we are ready to understand or talk about them. Some things that happen to us are almost too wonderful to describe in mere words.

“Don’t tell anyone… until.” Do you know people who tell too much too soon? They’re always talking about when they were saved, how it changed their life forever, and what they are going to do. Somehow it seems as if all their energy gets used up in talking about their spiritual experiences, and there’s not much left for living them.

There are times when we need to let the energy of the vision work within us. In fact, hoarding the energy, keeping the secret for a good while, seems to have been a suggestion Jesus made on a number of occasions. Someone would be healed by Jesus, and he would tell that person to keep it a secret. He also advised us to do our good works in secret.

“Tell no one,” said Jesus, “until after the resurrection.” Deep and overwhelming experiences need to mature within us before we talk about them with others who did not have the same experience. The other nine disciples would not have understood what Peter, James, and John were talking about. Furthermore, these three who had the vision did not really understand its significance until after the resurrection. Many times, it is only in looking back that we begin to understand what happened to us previously.

The faithful mystics throughout history who have experienced some of the deep mysteries of the Divine speak of them prudently, reservedly, cautiously, and with difficulty. The deepest spiritual experiences are for the most part inexpressible. When they need to be told to someone, they must be talked about carefully and reverently, and with the sense that there is still much lacking in our knowledge of God.

The Christian life is something like that. It is frequently a gradual growth and training — a wading deeper and deeper into the truth. To be born again is only a beginning. One needs to continue to grow and seek new truth.

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, when my children were growing up, I frequently spoke too soon — that is, I had quick advice to give and then too much advice as well. Most of the time, children are not asking for advice, but for understanding.

Here's a story from Zorba the Greek: "I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long in appearing and I was impatient. I bent over and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and a few seconds later died in my hand."

"That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a moral sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm."

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. Amen.