Sunday, June 11, 1995
KNOWING WHEN YOU'VE SAID ENOUGH
John 16:12-15

One of my very favorite sayings of Jesus is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 16, verse 12: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." He was having a final conversation with his closest followers and giving them a whole series of instructions and promises.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." How do you know when you've said enough? How do you know when to speak and when to keep silent? These are difficult lessons for all of us to learn and even more difficult to put into practice. Our words can contribute to another person's healing, and our words can also contribute to another's destruction. I don't know about you, but I often catch myself speaking too soon or saying too much.

Somewhere along the way, Jesus learned when to speak and when to keep silent. No doubt he knew that passage from Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament: "There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak." Jesus also knew when he had said enough.

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." There were some things the disciples were not ready to hear, and there are 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 him, "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. The story says 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 should be done, 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. He spoke gently to her and asked, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Think of the many things Jesus could've said to her and didn't. But as was the case with his disciples, he knew she could not bear accusations or condemnation, 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." What did Jesus mean when he said that his disciples could not bear some of what he had to say if he said it now? If he had told them all that God had in store for them, they wouldn't have been able to understand it or believe it. Could you bear to know all that is going to happen to you for the rest of your life if someone could tell it to you now? Would you even want to know?

Jesus knew that words spoken at the wrong time, before people are ready for them, are not heard at all, or are misunderstood, or worse still, can place a heavy burden on people which

they are not capable of carrying at that time. Thus, with our speaking words too soon, we can do more harm than good. We can hurt rather than heal. Waiting for the right time to speak is the same as waiting for the teachable moment.

A poor teacher, for example, might overwhelm us with an avalanche of facts which we cannot yet assimilate because there has been no preparation. We have no context in which to place them. The proper groundwork has not been put into place.

“I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

Because he was an excellent teacher, patiently and moderating his pace to theirs, Jesus led his disciples forward step by step, here a little and there a little, as they were able to understand and follow. It reminds me of what a wise person said to me years ago about leadership: If as a leader you get too far out front, your followers will think you are the enemy and shoot you.

The Christian life, even now, is something like that. It is frequently a gradual growth and training, a wading deeper and deeper into truth. We do not get a complete and final revelation all at once or know all the truth about God all at once. To walk with Jesus means that every turn on the way opens up new views and vistas to us, and we assimilate them as we grow and mature.

To be born again spiritually does not mean we are immediately mature adults in the faith. In the same way as our physical birth, there is a gradual growth and developmental progress. All of life is learning and growing.

As Pastor John Robinson said to our forefathers and mothers as they boarded the Mayflower for the journey to this new land: “The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.” God’s revelation is continuous. There is always more truth to be discovered. In the same way, Jesus was promising his followers that even after he was gone, God’s Holy Spirit would continue to instruct, lead, teach, and guide them, and that they needed to be open to that Spirit.

“I have yet more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” These words of Jesus are instructive not only in reminding us that learning about God and God’s truth is lifelong and that teachable moments can and will occur along the way, but they are also good advice for us in our day-to-day relationships with each other.

It’s so tempting 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, our growing children are not so much asking for advice but for understanding.

Now, as a grandparent, I’m discovering again that it’s especially important that I do not speak too soon and give too much advice to my children, who are parents, and to the grandchildren directly. Again, what they need more than advice is 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 it might not have the same value to those to whom it is directed.

Some time ago, I came across these suggestions 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 point of this exercise is to help us control our self-centered habit of inflicting stories or opinions or giving advice to people who aren’t ready or interested in hearing them, and then unconsciously speeding up the discourse in an attempt to finish in the face of their growing boredom.

“But people are usually interested in what I have to say,” you might argue. I can only suggest that the next time you find yourself relating some incident that seems to you interesting or important, you excuse yourself to go to the restroom before coming to the point. Then, when you return, keep silent and see whether anyone asks you to pick up where you left off. Don’t be surprised or angry if no one does.

This matter of when to speak and when to keep silent relates to us on a deeper level. Not long ago, 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 the 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 the shadows, many things would look flat.'”

In much the same way as shadows provide 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. It’s the same with music; the pauses between notes and how they vary are as important as the notes themselves. 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 be silent — and to know when you’ve said enough — these are difficult things to learn and to put into practice.

Walter Wangerin writes about his own experience when he was the pastor in his first church.

In his second year of ministry, the organist, a woman named Joselyn, became ill. Not long after, it was diagnosed as cancer. A few months later, the cancer had spread everywhere. She was dying quickly at age 47.

During this time, he visited her regularly in the hospital. He didn’t know what to say, nor did he know what he had the right to say. He wore out the Psalms. Psalms were safe. He prayed often that God’s will be done, scared to speculate what God’s will might be.

One day, when Joselyn awoke from surgery, he determined to be cheerful, to enliven her and to avoid the specter 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, and hopefully of the day when she would sit again at the organ, reading music during the sermon.

But Joselyn rolled a black eye his way. She raised one bony finger to his face. And she said, “Shut up.” He 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 back 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. And Joselyn became no more than bones. 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 drooping, 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 Holy 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 being. He said, “I love you.” And Joselyn widened her ebony eye. She put out her arms. 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 former parishes a similar but different situation. My wife and I had just returned from a long trip abroad, and we were met at the airport by the seminary 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 dying and he and his wife needed me. When I arrived at the hospital, her husband was in a coma, and a half hour later, he died. I didn’t know what to say — no words seemed adequate. I put my arms around her shoulders, and we cried together, no words. After a time, only a few words were said, and we were both comforted.

When to be silent? When to speak? How to know when you’ve said enough? Remember the promise of Jesus — that God’s Holy Spirit will continue to guide us into truth — God’s revelation continues, and that means listening on our part.

In the silence, before and after the words, we can know and become more aware of the presence of God. The Psalmist wrote: “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10) Sometimes, when we speak too soon and say too much, we block out with our words any awareness of the presence of God or any awareness of the problems of others. We can confuse words with prayer.

When Elijah the prophet ran in fear and hid in a cave, he discovered that God was not in the wind that broke the rocks into 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 not experienced it before. Do not be afraid of silence, of stillness. Here we encounter the Holy. Here God fills us. “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” We can count on God to keep working with us to help us receive as much of a message as we can bear, which is as much as we are capable of receiving. God will never give up on us.

Amen.