Sunday, June 10, 2001
KNOWING WHEN TO STOP
John 16:12-15

One thing I've always appreciated about the scheduled press conferences held by the Presidents of our country is the reporter who says at the appropriate time, "Thank you, Mr. President," and that lets everyone know that the press conference is over. That reporter senses that the questions have become redundant and that nothing more is going to be accomplished by continuing the press conference. I've often thought that every committee meeting and every board meeting that is held in profit and not-for-profit organizations needs a designated person to give that kind of signal. Someone is needed who can sense that the discussion is going nowhere; a person who knows that, for all practical purposes, the meeting is over and needs to be adjourned. More things could be said, but no one would pay attention.

One of the most difficult lessons each one of us has to learn is when to stop what we are doing because nothing more can be accomplished at that point. This is especially true when we are giving advice to someone. We need to learn when to stop talking because we've said enough. That's why 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."

Jesus knew when to talk and when to stop. He knew that his words could contribute to another person's healing but that words spoken at the wrong time could do harm rather than good. No matter how good your advice might be, or how truthful your words are, if the person or persons you are talking with are not ready to hear them, nothing positive will be accomplished. In the Hebrew scriptures, there is this wise proverb: "There is a time to speak and a time to be silent."

Jesus knew that there were some things his disciples were ready to hear and there were some things they were not yet ready to hear. So he said to them, "I still have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." He knew when he had said enough. He knew when to end the sermon, when to conclude the speech, when to stop teaching because his followers had all they could understand.

In another incident remembered in the gospel of John, a woman was brought to Jesus because she had been caught in adultery. The religious authorities 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 women to death. What do you say about her?" Wisely, he 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 the religious authorities 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 he could've said but didn't. He knew she was embarrassed enough. She did not need to hear more words of condemnation. She had all that she could bear. 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.” Jesus knew that if he told his disciples all that was going to happen to him in the very near future, and if he told them of the temptations and suffering that they were going to face in the future, they would not be able to understand it, accept it, or bear it.

Think of this. If it were possible, in some miraculous way, for you to know all the things that were going to happen to you — the good and the bad — for the rest of your life, would you want to have that knowledge? Would you be able to accept it and carry the load it might entail?

Jesus knew that words spoken at the wrong time, before people are ready to hear them, can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. You can place a heavy burden on someone who is not capable of carrying it at that time. Speaking words too soon can do more harm than good. You can hurt rather than heal. Waiting for the right time to speak is the same as waiting for the teachable moment.

This statement from Jesus applies to our everyday life in so many ways. An inexperienced teacher, for example, might overwhelm his or her students with an avalanche of facts that they cannot easily assimilate because there has been no preparation. They have no context in which to place them. The proper groundwork or foundation has not been laid. In good curriculum planning, there are prerequisite courses that need to be mastered before the advanced courses can be taken.

When children are very young, there are many things they are not able to understand about life because they do not yet have enough life experience. You can try to tell them in advance, but they are not ready to hear it.

I often say to young couples who come to be married, “I could tell you many things about marriage because my wife and I have been married now almost 47 years, but you are not ready to hear them now. After you’ve been married for two or three years, then you will begin to have the context for understanding what I would have to say. Then you will be more ready to hear it, and it will make some sense.”

“I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Because he was an excellent teacher, patiently moderating his pace to theirs, Jesus led his disciples forward step by step, here a little, there a little, matching his teaching to their ability to assimilate what he was saying. It reminds me of what a wise person said to me years ago about good leadership: “If, as a leader, you get too far out front, your followers will think you are the enemy and shoot you.”

Many of you have read the remarkable book Tuesdays with Morrie, which has been on the best-seller list now for more than 180 weeks. Mitch Albom, who wrote the book, says that when he was a much younger person, he would not have been able to benefit very much from spending time with Morrie in his illness, because he would not have had enough life experience to begin to understand the wisdom that he was now able to comprehend. It’s the kind of book that needs to be read again about every five years because each time you read it, it will have more meaning because of your own experiences.

Growing and maturing in your spiritual life is like that. It is frequently a gradual growth and training, a wading deeper and deeper into spiritual knowledge and experience. You do not get a complete and final revelation all at once or know all the truth about God in an instant. To

walk with God means that every turn on the way opens up new views and vistas, and you are able to assimilate them as you grow and mature.

To be born again spiritually does not mean you are immediately a mature person in the faith. In the same way as our physical growth from a tiny helpless baby to a mature adult human being is a gradual process that takes many years, so it is with our mental and spiritual maturity. All of life is learning and growing.

It is significant that after Jesus told his followers, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now,” he promised them that after he was gone from them in a physical sense, God’s Spirit would continue to instruct, lead, teach, and guide them and that they needed to be open to that Spirit.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” These words 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 these words are also good advice for us in our day-to-day relationships with each other.

It’s so tempting to speak too soon and say too much in our everyday personal relationships. As I look back, I know that as a parent when my children were growing and maturing, I frequently spoke too soon. I gave quick advice and then too much advice before they were ready to understand it. Most of the time, our growing children are not so much asking for advice as they are for understanding.

Now, as a grandparent, I’m discovering again that it’s especially important not to speak too much and give too much advice to my children who are parents and to the grandchildren directly. What they need more than advice is a good listener, one with understanding. I need to remember the words of Jesus: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” What I have to say might be valuable in my estimation, but it does not necessarily 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,” then keep silent.

The point of the exercise is to help you control your habit of inflicting stories or opinions or giving advice to people who aren’t ready or interested in hearing what you have to say.

You might argue, “But people are usually interested in what I have to say.” I can only suggest that the next time you find yourself relating some incident that seems interesting and very important to you, 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 your comments where you left off. Don’t be surprised or angry if no one does.

This issue of when to speak and when to keep silent relates to all of life. Not long ago, I came across a metaphor that helped me to better understand the relationship between speaking and silence. The metaphor is that of a shadow. Anne Dillard, in her book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, tells the story of an eye surgery that helped a person who could barely see to become fully sighted. “When the newly sighted young woman saw photographs and paintings for the first time, 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 the same way that shadows provide shape, silence offers dimension and depth to words. Words become real when they are bordered by silence. Periods of silence provide the shadows and outlines that give our words perspective and depth. It’s the same way with music. The pauses between the 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, by not speaking, your silence can communicate more than any words you might use. When to speak and when to be silent, and when to know when you’ve said enough, are difficult things to learn and put into practice.

Here’s the story of a young minister and how he learned this lesson. The organist in his church was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She was dying quickly at age 47. During these weeks preceding her death, he visited her regularly in the hospital. He didn’t know what to say.

One day, when she awoke from surgery, he determined to be cheerful, to try to enliven her. He talked of the summer weather and told her about the tennis he played that morning, and many other things. After a short time, she looked at him and asked him to be quiet. He said later, “God help me. I learned so slowly. I was trying to give her back the world she did not have and, in so doing, was taking away the only world she did have. I had been trying to cancel her serious, noble, and faithful dance with death.”

He kept visiting her. Now, most of the time, he simply held her hand for a time and only spoke when she did. One day, he entered her room at noon, saying nothing. This time, he stayed longer because he could tell, as he held her hand, that she didn’t want him to leave.

The hours passed, and he could see that she was dying.

Listen to his own words as he described what happened: “The evening came, and with it came the Holy Spirit. For the words I said were not my own. I said, ‘I love you.’ She put out her arms. She hugged me, and I hugged those dying bones. She whispered, ‘I love you too.’ And that was all we said, and that was all that needed to be said. And she died.” Amen.