

CENTRAL UNITED CHURCH WINDSOR

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God Through the Silence * All Saints 2021: (ADT)

All Saints' Day and the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed on All Souls' Day both celebrate this mutual belonging. All Saints' Day celebrates men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has seen the grace of God powerfully at work.

It is an opportunity to give thanks for that grace, and for the wonderful ends to which it shapes a human life; it is a time to be encouraged by the example of the saints and to recall that sanctity may grow in the ordinary circumstances, as well as the extraordinary crises, of human living.

The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate key. It allows us to remember with thanksgiving before God those whom we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith.

We remember today.....

Reflection: Pastor David Washburn of Chestnut Grove Baptist Church in Virginia did an experiment with his congregation one morning. He came to the pulpit to preach, and stood in silence for 20 minutes before saying a word, and the discomfort of that silence was quite noticeable.

Silence is something most of us aren't comfortable with. This is particularly true of people of the Western world. I spent the last week doing an intensive learning circle called Right Relations. Twenty students from my seminary joined with eleven of Sandy Saulteaux, which is the United Church Aboriginal seminary. We spent 4 days studying with our Indigenous students ministers, and man, what an experience that was!

There were many takeaways, but one of the biggest takeaways was that whereas Indigenous peoples could speak and sit in silence for minutes in silence for the movement of the Spirit, the rest of us found that silence to be uncomfortable. We will many times equate silence with something being wrong and will rush to fill the silence, but far too often in our rush, we inappropriately fill the silence.

During the course of a conversation, there invariably comes that lull, the silence that indicates we've exhausted your realm of small talk. We've gotten through the pleasantries of "Hello, how are you, how was your week," and we have to make a decision to either extend the conversation beyond small talk, going a little deeper, or move on and speak with someone else.

There's also that awkward silence of riding in an elevator. Have you ever noticed how people rarely make eye contact and speak when riding on an elevator? It's an interesting phenomenon. I will many times speak to people on elevators just to see their reaction, and oftentimes get that look that says, "Don't you know we don't talk on the elevator." When we've had busy days at work or with our children or with household responsibilities, we sometimes long for silence, but when we're at a social gathering or in the presence of others, silence usually makes us uncomfortable.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt as though God was silent? How did you react? How did you respond to God's silence? In this morning's scripture passage, God, through his son Jesus Christ, is initially silent. Jesus receives word that Lazarus, the brother of his dear friends Mary and Martha, is sick.

Their message specifically said, "He whom you love is sick." The underlying meaning is, "Come quickly and heal our brother," but we read that after hearing of Lazarus' illness, Jesus stays put two days longer. He hears the plea of his beloved friends, and Jesus remains silent. He doesn't go to Bethany. He doesn't even send them a message. He is simply silent.

In light of the situation, we could characterize Jesus' silence as insensitive. It might even be appropriate to say that it was callous and hurtful to maintain this silence during this time of great need. Mary and Martha had a strong relationship with Jesus. They had a deep faith in him as the Son of God, and they had no reason to believe that he wouldn't respond to their request that he come to Bethany.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been in the midst of a situation where you called out to God, where you sent him a message to come, because you desperately needed to see and hear from him, but you felt as though you got nothing? He was silent.

If you can say, “Yes,” you’re not alone. I’m sure there are others here who have had this experience. I’ve had this experience. God’s own son, Jesus Christ, had the same experience. As he hung on a cross, he cried out, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Why do you remain silent in the midst of my pain? Why are you silent when I need you the most? Understanding God’s silence isn’t easy, because our natural tendency is to interpret the silence as indifference. This is especially true when we are in the midst of a crisis. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are certainly in the midst of a crisis, and the last thing they want is for their Lord to be silent.

It’s also true when we’re in the midst of making a prayerfully important decision. Have you ever prayed this prayer, “God, help me make this decision.” “God if you’ll only show me what to do, then I’ll do it.” “God, I need to know how to deal with this situation, please show me.” And nothing – you get silence.

We don’t understand it, and it can be very frustrating. When Mary finally sees Jesus, she places the blame and responsibility on him. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Many of us have had the same or similar thoughts at different times in our lives.

While we don’t fully understand the silence, and while it can frustrate us, God many times uses the silence to draw us closer. Jesus certainly drew Mary and Martha closer through his silence, for it was through the silence that Jesus was able to bring about an even bigger revelation...raising Lazarus from the dead.

The initial reaction and the initial focus was on God’s absence; His silence in not responding to their pleas, but through the silence He drew them closer and brought about an even greater revelation. Our challenge is to not interpret God’s silence as indifference, insensitivity, or callousness, but as a sign that He is bringing us into an even more wonderful understanding of himself.

When we can’t hear God, we will find that He has trusted you in the most intimate way possible- with silence, but not a silence of despair, but one of pleasure, because He sees that you can withstand an even bigger revelation than you’re expecting. God’s silence is an indication of his intimacy and trust. As parents, there comes a time in our relationship with our children where we have to fade into the background and remain silent. As our children grow and mature, part of the process is their having to work through situations in life and figure some things out for themselves. Our silence is not an act of giving up, but rather a supreme gift of love.

That’s not to say that our children will come through each of those situations unscathed, because they won’t, but the gift of our silence will many times awaken them to a deeper understanding than if we had been hovering over them, providing step-by-step instructions.

The same is true for God, who as our heavenly parent gives us the gift of his silence. We won’t always come through unscathed either, but we too may be awakened to a deeper understanding and revelation. For Mary and Martha and for us, that deeper understanding and revelation was Jesus’ own words: Vs. 25-26.

He puts it right out there: Do you believe this? He is asking her to believe both that he is the resurrection and the life and that as the resurrection and the life he defeats the power of death. That is, he asks her whether she believes in the fullness of his relationship with God and the effects of that relationship on the life of the world. He asks her if she could lean into her faith, and push beyond what she thinks she knows.

Many, if not all of us prefer the known to the unknown, naturally. We prefer the definite to the ambiguous. We prefer that which can be proved to that which cannot be explained. We prefer words and clarity to silence. It’s hard to lean into our faith.. The relevance of faith lies not in the power of faith as such, but in the fact that faith creates communion with Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ, we receive the gift of life. Jesus defeats the power of death because through him, the world meets the power of the love of God.

The promise of God offered in the face of death should equip us to understand the promises of God that are offered to us in the midst of life. And that promise will in turn, help us to understand and help us to actually stand on the promises of God in the midst of God’s seeming silence.

On this celebration of All Saints, we think of the themes when we ask God why, and have received no answer. We understand the passing of our loved ones who are aged and sick, but we question the passing of loved ones through accident, or unexpected illness when they seem to be in their prime. We certainly question the passing of those who die through violence and strife.

But as we question why... May we find God’s answers through the silence. May we find answers that are comforting, healing and peaceful. May we access our faith and trust in God that he does all things well. Amen.

All Saints’ Day Prayer:

You are our God and we are Your people, and we are grateful that You have claimed us as your own. You have set us in the company of saints past and present, among those who have made bold witness to Your goodness and Your truth. Your Word opens up new futures where we see no way forward.

You know the places in our hearts where we are afraid. afraid of a future we cannot control; afraid of losing health and independence; afraid for the well-being of our children; afraid that past mistakes will ruin our future. Afraid in your silence... Write the stories of your people deep into our hearts so that we may learn to trust you beyond our fears. Give us hearts and minds and spirits ready to trust and follow wherever your Spirit leads, confident that you will not lead us beyond your loving embrace.

Bless our church and our Saints within it. Bless our shut ins..... We pray for those in our hearts...

We ask in Jesus' name whose outstretched arms welcome us and hold us securely in your grace. And who taught us to pray.....