

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19) – Year B – September 13, 2009**

**Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38**

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In an age of extraordinary communication, to the point of information overload, where conversation, twitter and chatter, the Internet, text messaging and TV seem to rule our lives, what do we know of silence? As an introvert who makes a living out of words -- out of preaching and serving *the Word* – today’s Psalm was both like re-discovering a lost treasure, and like a revelation of great joy. Sometimes our worlds become very narrow, a treadmill of routine and the blandness of the familiar that passes before our sleepy eyes almost unseen and unheard. What can change our waking reverie to glorious reverence? When the ease and simplicity of global communication has made the world very small, is there anything left to discover in the expansiveness of God’s creation or God’s commandments; anything left to see and hear, as we broaden our gaze through the windows of imagination?

Psalm 19 is easily differentiated into three sections. The first concerning nature, the second concerning the Torah or Law, and the third a personal prayer to God. C.S. Lewis felt that Psalm 19 is “one of the greatest lyrics in the world,” but also said that, “The actual words supply no logical connection between the first and second movements....” thereby resembling the technique of a modern poet, leaving us to find out the connecting link for ourselves. In her collection of poems and prose called *West Wind*, Mary Oliver, who also makes a living with words, shares a poem called “stars”. She writes, “Here in my head, language keeps making its tiny noises. How can I hope to be friends with the hard white stars whose flaring and hissing are not speech but a pure radiance? How can I hope to be friends with the yawning spaces between them where nothing, ever, is spoken? Tonight, at the edge of the field, I stood very still, and looked up, and tried to be empty of words. What joy was it, that almost found me? What amiable peace?” (End quote).

With the constant noise around us and within our minds, it’s hard to appreciate that God is mostly known in silence. The laws of physics will tell us that sound cannot travel across a vacuum. The glorious cosmos, the stars, and space where earth, our island home, is just one planet among many in God’s universe, is wrapped in a vast, dark and silent vacuum. Yet as the Psalmist tells us the whole of God’s creation points to the creator, and sings the praises of God’s name, for those who have ears to hear, and eyes to see. God’s first word was creation, and creation remains a powerful witness to God’s silence, and a great trial to the endless questions of humanity! Just by being, creation makes God known. All humanity is without excuse for our willful blindness, as Paul writes in Romans (1:20), “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” All humanity is made in God’s image. For you and I, who are clothed in righteousness by God’s grace and faith in Jesus Christ, does the world see the face of Christ, the power of God working in us, and through the whole Body of Christ in the world? Or have we too become mute and virtually invisible, dimly burning wicks, instead of bright shining lights, filled to overflowing with God’s love, power and passion? Our lives are to be filled with praise in word and deed to the glory of God’s holy name.

The phrase “the glory of God” appears nineteen times in Scripture – sprinkled like stardust across both the Hebrew and New Testaments. One of the most enjoyable hours I spent was in a student-led class where we had all taken turns in exploring different ways of teaching the great truths of the Bible. I knew this class was going to be particularly fun when the paper plates appeared dotted with blobs of different colored finger paint, and we were each handed a piece of Scripture with a single word highlighted. The first part of the exercise was to paint our understanding of the meaning of the highlighted word. After I had finished dipping and daubing, mostly making a glorious mess, I glanced at what some of the others had done with their paint and imaginations. Looking at the results, it didn’t take long to figure out that we had all been given the same word to paint out – the word was ‘glory’. Most of us had gone straight for the warmest colors -- brilliant sunflower yellow, bright orange, and glowing red. A lot of the pictures had some kind of crazy palm-shaped sun with finger-pointing rays radiating from

their centers, yet each one was also quite unique. The mystery, the beauty, the expansiveness of God's glory cannot be so easily contained. As the Psalmist reminds us, "nothing is hidden from its burning heat". Even when we do not hear the voice of the universe proclaiming God's praises, God's constant yearning to be heard in our hearts, to be in relationship with each of us, kindles a reciprocal flame of desire in each of our souls.

Every writer, every poet, and every teacher knows that books are silent lessons in bursting the bonds and the boundaries of sensual reality. The writer of the psalm declares that, "The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul... rejoices the heart, gives light to the eyes, ... [and is] more to be desired than gold." There is no doubt that in order to grow in the wisdom of the Lord, we need to connect to God in as many different ways as we can – prayer and Bible study, play, silent meditation, and worship to name but a few. When we move the fences of our spiritual imaginations outward we are effectively claiming new grounds in which to plow and sow, to plant and grow, or to wander around in and simply wonder. Oliver writes, "Once, deep in the woods, I found the white skull of a bear and it was utterly silent – and once a river otter, in a steel trap, and it too was utterly silent. What can we do but keep on breathing in and out, modest and willing, and in our places?" (End quote). She poses an important question here that we all must answer. The law of the Lord was never meant to be a set of rigid rules or social conformity for the sake of appearances. Rather, as Ruth Boling tells us, the call to faithfulness as children of the new covenant, is "a way of being in the world that holds God dear... [meaning] that we rest in the presence of God, converse with God through ... engagement with the Scriptures, and ... translate our faith into action."

If our Master is the Lord, then our lives should be motivated by love of God and love of our neighbor. However, when humanity chose to fall into sinfulness and death, all of creation was dragged along for the duration. Instead of looking beyond the mess we made to the perfect love of God, we took nature as our mistress, and imitated her harsh cruelty, which is, ironically, the groaning consequence of our own foolishness. It is not just the stars that are mute. There are millions of people in the world who have cried silent tears as their children died from bloating hunger, or from diseases that are easily treated or cured with simple and inexpensive medicines in my world and yours. There is the screaming silence of those murdered for political injustice, the saints and martyrs that now stand under the altar of God, demanding God's justice. There is the fearful silent agony of abused women and children, whose hidden bruises sink bone deep. For all who have no voice, is it truly God's justice that you and I remain in our places? I don't think so. Faith is never passive, but always active. If you and I do nothing, we are the ones caught by the world, trapped by jaws of steel. We are the ones who have set aside our freedom in Christ.

"*Listen, listen*, I'm forever saying, *Listen to the river, to the hawk, to the hoof, to the mockingbird*, .... – then I come up with a few words, like a gift," Oliver says. And she is right. We must listen carefully for the voice of God, especially amidst the clanging cacophony of our environment. And we must speak God's truth in love boldly to be heard above the racket that surrounds us. The gift every Christian must share is the gift of hope in the redemption by our Lord Jesus Christ. The work every Christian must do is to put our faith into action. And so, may the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.