

## "THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE"

### INTRODUCTION

By and large modern man is uncomfortable with silence. We are uneasy in our solitude and the more so if that solitude is soundless. We become fidgety in church when the period of silent prayer stretches out. We are apt to be embarrassed by any noticeable lull in the conversation.

I think there's as much truth as humor in the story that is going around right now about the non-Quaker who was a recent guest for a meal in the Quaker household that is now residing in the White House. Apparently this guest was unfamiliar with the Quaker custom of a silent grace at the beginning of a meal, and later on in describing this part of his visit to the White House, he said, "There was an embarrassing silence when we first sat down to dinner, but I told the President and his wife a funny story, and that helped to break the ice."

I suppose there is a tendency on our part to fill in the silences with noise - conversation, television, radio, records. Christopher Morley was reacting against it when he wrote those lines:

Quiet is what we need. By telephone,  
The press, the mail, the doorbell, radio,  
AP, or NAM, or CIO,  
We're micro-organized and overgrown  
With everybody's business but our own;  
Pipe it down, chain talkers. Muffle and  
Slow the rapid pulse. I wonder if you know  
How good it feels, sometimes to be alone?

Incessantly loquacious generation,  
Let yea and nay be your communication  
Before the world comes open at the seams  
Invest some private enterprise in dreams.  
In unimpassioned silence we might find  
(If ever) What the author Had In Mind".

"Incessantly loquacious generation....." There is a judgment upon so many of us - ministers included.

### DEVELOPMENT

I'm reminded of some words in an article that was in the papers back in November following the election. The scene was at the Miami airport and President Nixon and the defeated team of Mr. Humphrey and Mr. Muskie were present. This is the way the article read:

"Nixon and Humphrey, full of praise for each other, spoke at some length. Then the microphone was turned over to Muskie who delivered only one line. 'In Maine', he said, 'we have a saying: You don't say anything that doesn't improve on silence'"

There are those occasions when silence has its own meaning and message. The subject of this sermon, as some of you will recognize, is the title of a record by Simon and Garfunkel, "The Sounds of Silence". Different people will find different meanings in this song about man's inability to communicate - "people talking without speaking - hearing without listening". The title itself is food for thought and a start for more than one sermon on this intriguing theme.

"The Sounds of Silence...." ~~What are some of them.~~

## "THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE"

### INTRODUCTION

A wise man once said, "If you want to know the character of a people, listen to the songs they sing".

On a recent Wednesday evening over at Inwood House, we fell into a discussion about our Christian hymns and the fact that so few of them speak with relevance to the real needs of people today. One of the girls suggested that the folk music of our time comes closer to catching the deepest feelings of our lives than anything we usually sing on a Sunday morning in the church service. She suggested that we forget about hymn books and organs and go modern with guitars and folk music. Her suggestion didn't do much to lift my spirits inasmuch as I had just placed the order for our new hymnals that day and was also preparing the way for our trustees to sign a contract for a new organ. However, she may have a point.

### DEVELOPMENT

A couple of young composers named Simon and Garfunkel have written a modern hymn which many of you have heard across the weeks of this past year. It forms a soft and yet haunting background to a number of scenes in the movie, "The Graduate". One verse goes like this:

"And in the naked light, I saw ten thousand people, many more, People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening, People writing songs that voices never shared, No one dared disturb the sounds of silence".	There is a great deal of good to be said about much of the modern folk music.
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Mind you - silence does make sounds. When you and I and all of us together in the church remain silent and fail to respond to some issue or some concern, we are speaking loud and clear - as the expression goes - to those around us. To remain silent in the face of some of the tremendous issues we confront today is to cast a vote of influence on the wrong side. Simon and Garfunkel are warning us not to become drop-outs in human relationships. How important it is that we enter creatively into the lives of other people and become involved with them and for them. To remain silent is simply to contribute to the already broken fabric of humanity.

Now this Canvass for Christian Mission which you have heard about this morning is an effort on the part of your church to help people break that silence of non-involvement and to assist them in becoming involved in and concerned about the well-being of others. I hope that each and every one of you will seriously consider responding. Don't become a drop-out in terms of human relationships.

### THE CHURCH AND THE MISSION TO THE WORLD

Now there are several direction in which we can run with this theme. I am thinking, for example, of the enormous amount of poverty and suffering in our world. If all the suffering experienced in the world in this moment were caught up in one shriek, it would create a sound wave which in its devastation would depopulate the earth. And yet - so many of us have never really heard the sound of suffering. I read recently that if the hungry of the world lined up outside your door, the line would stretch around the world 25 times. Consider for a few moments the church's responsibility to the world and the suffering in it.

A nation engaged in a war in Asia, in rioting and assassination in its streets at home, and with an alarming growth of doubt and despair in its entire social fabric requires a church that is vibrant, dynamic, courageous and alive. Simon and Garfunkel again sound the warning with their words: "Silence like a cancer grows".

Let the church remain silent - indecisive - unaware - and our silence will grow like a cancer on the land. It is a tragic commentary on the way we look at ourselves, I think, that when disorders broke out following the assassination of Martin Luther King, the reaction of some of our churches was one of withdrawal and fear. One of the Bishops of the Methodist Church told how a clergyman in a church in a certain city came running into the church offices yelling, "There's going to be trouble.....lock the church doors....close up the building". ~~And the church staff scurried around sealing off the precious property from the people on the outside.~~

I wonder how that must look to the people on the outside. What sort of impression does such action create? I wonder....do we react to criticism, to disturbance by simply locking our intellectual, spiritual and moral doors against it? The Bishop went on to say that if the church does not come to grips with the problems of our time - ~~race, the inner city, world peace~~ - it will soon become a museum and the people will pass it by.

You lock up museums because all you have inside are inert, dead objects and relics that are valued as things, to be protected from theft and vandalism. But you do not lock up churches - not unless all you have to protect are some dead, inert objects and relics. The gospel of Christ, I would remind you, is not a possession, but rather it is a gift, and it is any man's for the taking. Try to lock it up inside the institutional church and men will seek it outside. Our choice is not whether to keep it locked up or to let it go abroad in the world. Our choice is whether or not to go with it as it moves out into the lives of men.

It was Canon Alexander of St. Paul's Cathedral in London who has estimated by what kind of measurements I do not know that the Cathedral is actually moving down Fleet Street at the rate of one inch every hundred years. There are many of us who feel that the church must move faster than that if it is to be around here one hundred years from now. My own judgement is that unless the church is intelligently and increasingly involved in relating its faith in Christ to the crucial issues which are bearing down hardest upon the people of God's world - peace, poverty, racial injustice - unless the church demonstrates within its own membership an experience of concern and Christ-like love - a love that is truly redemptive - then the church is destined for and deserves extinction, just as surely as that which befell the dinosaur in an earlier age. The church must be converted to Christ, or it will perish.

Listen again to what Simon and Garfunkel have to say:

"And the people bowed and prayed,  
To the neon god they made  
And the sign flashed out its warning  
In the words that it was forming.  
And the sign said,  
The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls  
And tenement halls  
And whispered in the sounds of silence"

Many of our church leaders are deeply concerned about the future leadership of the Christian church. Among seminary students there is an ever-increasing decline of those who are interested in the parish ministry. Dr. Bennett of Union Seminary here in our city stated last May that only 19% of last spring's graduating class would go into the parish ministry. Most of the students are turning to other

fields: institutional chaplaincy, campus ministry, work among migrants, college teaching, and other forms of a specialized ministry. People sometimes raise the question: why? Why is the parish suffering from a decrease in status within the whole Christian Church, and especially among students and younger ministers. I think it is because of an idealism born out of a growing disillusionment with the slow-moving and generally conservative nature of the parish church. It is because - rightly or wrongly - they have come to believe that the parish church is really <sup>NOT</sup> "where the action is", that is, it is no longer on the front line where the real issues that affect people today in society are being determined.

And when the church is silent, then the prophets do speak from the subway walls and tenement halls.

WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE?

~~The question I now wish to have each of you think about in terms of your own life is:~~ what is your response - our response - to all of this. Too often, the sound of our silence is almost deafening. So few respond. And, as I try to analyze it, I feel that underlying all of the sounds of our silence is a fundamental confusion about who we are, what we believe, and what constitute the real values of life. Certainly here in the city with the pace and pattern of life fast and varied, it is hard to keep a perspective and a sense of real Christian value. We encounter confusion.

Dr. Morris Fishbein, the one time president of the AMA once told the story of a doctor who wrote our a prescription in the usual illegible fashion. The patient used it for two years as a pass on the Long Island Railroad. Twice it got him into Yankee Stadium and once it got him into Radio City Music Hall. It came in handy as a note from his employer to the cashier to increase his salary. And to top it off, his daughter once played it on the piano and it won her a scholarship to the Curtis Institute of Music. Talk about confusion. This is nothing compared to the confusion that surrounds many people today. We have been thrust into an age of almost unbelievable change, a time when all of the processes of change are being accelerated as never before. We live under pressures that our parents did not live under. There is a restless idealism in many people - both under and over thirty. Many are looking for something to find and build life on, and as they look to find it in the church, I cannot help but wonder if the church is helping them or failing them in finding it.

Too often we simply turn a deaf ear to their probing questions and honest criticism, and make no effort to communicate our faith. One wonders if we have a faith at all to communicate. Theodore Parker Ferris of Boston has made a telling analogy between our loss of faith and the childhood discovery that there is no Santa Claus. He speaks of three stages: simple childhood belief, a period of "emancipated unbelief", and then the recognition that the language once heard is still deeply meaningful, although in a new way. Too many of us, I fear, are still in that middle stage of "emancipated unbelief" - boasting of our freedom from childhood superstition, glorying in the power of our own intellect. But unbelief has no constructive power for a world desperately in need of a faith.

The time has come to think larger thoughts about God. No small view of God will do in the kind of universe he is revealing to the minds of men today. And we in the church must keep pace with it, catch up with it, bring to the realm of spiritual reality the same depth of dimension and dedication of mind that we bring to other things and think some new thoughts about the grandeur and glory of God.

Despite the incredible progress we have made in transportation, for example, or in the field of communication, we are still illiterate about so much of the

world we live in. We have knowledged about so many things, but so little wisdom in the use of that knowledge. We know how to make a world a neighborhood, but we have not yet been able to make it a brotherhood. We know how to make a hydrogen bomb go off, but we have not yet learned how to keep it from going off. We know how to control forces, but we have not yet learned how to control ourselves.  
C. P. Snow:

I noticed that an anthropologist in Chicago recently made this statement:

"Man has been using his brains too much. His brain power has become so destructive that he's got to stop thinking, at least about atoms, or he will think himself into extinction".

Then he goes on to say that man has been using his brain so much that it is actually altering his physical appearance. The top of his head is getting very large and the bottom of his face is gradually receding. In fact, it has already affected his ears. His ears don't wiggle any more. There was a time, you know, when a man could turn his ears in the direction of a sound like a deer or a dog. But now he can't even wiggle them. I tried it this morning while I was shaving. My ears still wiggle, so that lets me out. I'm no intellectual. It's a good IQ test. Try it. If your ears wiggle, no brains.

Seriously - how little we know about other people. How much we have mis-learned about other people. How little we really know about ourself. We move in our little circles. We hide behind our little fences, and about all we see of the other fellow is what we can glimpse through the little chinks in the fences. And the great world problem growing more acute every day: how to build bridges of brotherhood across the great oceans of ignorance and silence. COMMUNICA-  
TION.

We sometimes forget that we were not born here isolated individuals like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. We are part of a family and therefore, we have to take the whole human family into consideration in everything we do. God has set us down in a network of relationships where we have to link our lives with other people and learn to love them and live with them and for them. A Christian person - a mature person - is not one who learns to love himself and stops there. He is not one who learns to love the members of his own race, or family, and stops there. A truly Christian person is continually widening the circles of his interest to be concerned about all people - for whom Christ died. You see - nothing is right for me, for my family, for my church, for my race, for my nation - that is not right for the last man on the other side of the world. Something is driving that home to us today and it is amazing that so many are still failing to grasp it - and many who are failing to grasp are in our churches.

Isn't that what Simon and Garfunkel are saying to the church today:

"Hello darkness, my old friend.  
I've come to talk to you again.  
Because a vision softly creeping  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,  
And the vision what was planted in my brain - still remains,  
Within the sounds of silence"

That vision must not remain silent. It must become embodied in concrete action. And it is with this thought in mind that we urge you to commit yourself to some act of significant service or involvement. The church must do all in its power to break down those walls of silence that now separate people from people and separate us from God.

On the 17th of December in the year 1903 - 65 years ago this coming Tuesday - the Wright brother succeeded in keeping their home-made airplane in the air above Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, for the first time. On landing they immediately sent a telegram to their sister in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio which read: "First sustained flight today - 59 seconds - hope to be home for Christmas". The sister in Dayton was so excited with the news that she took the telegram to the local newspaper office and next morning - believe it or not - the following headline appeared above the story: "Popular Bicycle Merchants Expected Home for Christmas Holidays".

And so it was that a bungling editor missed the point of one of the great events of this century. I fear that many people in our churches are guilty of the same sort of thing - missing out or passing by some of the great events taking place in life today. Midst all the exciting events of our day - events seeking to challenge our conscience and invite our involvement, deserving of our most disciplined response - what ideas, what concerns will we choose to participate in and give ourselves to, so that some future age - fifty to hundred years from now - may not be required to say of us: the events of their time were tremendous, the issues momentous, but the headlines of their time were trivial, and their silence deafening.

"Tonight Shanghai is burning  
And we are dying, too.  
What bomb more surely mortal  
Than death inside of you?  
For some men die by shrapnel,  
And some go down in flames,  
But most men perish inch by inch  
In play at little games"

PRAYER: We thank thee, O God, for the church that has met in various places down through the ages, sometimes in great cathedrals and sometimes in catacombs and sometimes in the fields. Help us to recover in our own lives the thing that makes the church its real self, and then send us out to carry that spirit of the living Christ into our homes, our offices, our schools - wherever we may go during the days of the week ahead. Amen