

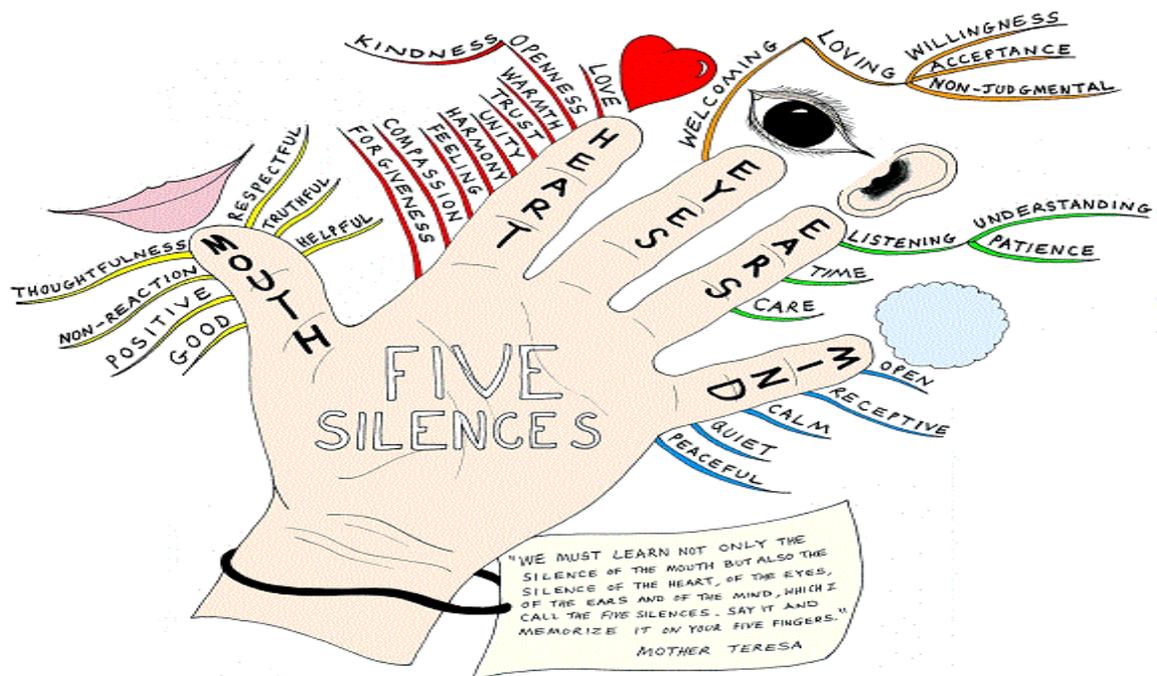
“The Pearls of Life: Silence”
Deuteronomy 27:1-10

In 2008 the movie WALL-E was an instant hit. WALL-E imagines what will become of the earth and the rest of creation 700 years from now. The earth is literally a wasteland, overwhelmed by the mountains of garbage generated by a consumer society gone out of control.

Having rendered the planet uninhabitable, humans have evacuated to become refugees in space, living on luxury liner space ships where the giant Buy-N-Large corporation, relentlessly markets the next available meal. Back on earth, only one robot was still functioning: WALL-E (which stands for Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class). He is one of an army of obsolete robots who piled the trash into mountains. All alone except for a cockroach he has befriended, WALL-E continued daily in his futile work. I loved the storyline and the characters, but the most fascinating part for me is that there were not many words or dialogue in the movie. It was pretty much dependent on other kinds of communication, listening, looking, and just being. Here is a clip of when WALL-E meets EVE, another robot who was sent to earth for another mission.

<https://youtu.be/Cnv-iFhdlqE>

The creators of this film were amazing because they captured the power of nonverbal communication in such powerful ways. And so today, we are invited to ponder stillness and listening as ways of communication. We are focusing on the six pearls of silence. These are the oblong beads on the strand of beads we all have received. They represent the importance of silence. I like that there are six of them and they are spread out through the strand to indicate our need for regular times of silence and stillness. One of the most important aspects of prayer for us as human beings is being able to listen to God and not just with our ears, but with our hearts, minds, and souls. That is why it is important to practice silence not just by saying no words, but by opening our whole being to God. Mother Teresa invited people to what she called “The Five Silences.” She said, “We must learn not only the silence of the mouth but also the silence of the heart, of the eyes, of the ears and of the mind, which I call the five silences. Say it and memorize it on your five fingers.”



In our Bible story, we hear Moses calling his people to silence in the presence of God so that they may retain the words of God. The book of Deuteronomy is a series of speeches and instructions (and a couple of narratives) by Moses to the people of ancient Israel, whom he led out of Egypt. We remember the context of their slavery. They were in Egypt for over 400 years as slaves. Moses was called by God to help lead them out of the house of slavery in Egypt which took them a while and a lot of help from God. Then they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They were being prepared during that time to become a people with a different value system. Our text today comes from the time when they were camped at the eastern bank of the Jordan River. The Israelites were about to enter into the Land of Promise. Their national dream was becoming a reality. But Moses was worried about this transition. He was not going to be with them any longer as his death was imminent. They were going to be with the other nations and people who were already there, and Moses was worried that they would forget the teachings and commandments which God had given to them. The influence of popular culture around them and the busyness of life were potential threats to their faithfulness to the ways of God. Also, once the people became settled in their new life, they might forget their need for God to guide them daily. Worse yet, they might even think that they saved themselves through their own might and not through God's grace. And so Moses established some important rituals for the elders and the people to follow in order to ensure that the reciting of and the listening to scriptures would never be neglected but be seen as an essential part of their identity. Moses instructed them about a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem to take place soon after Israel has crossed the Jordan and entered the land. These instructions concern having large stones covered with the words of the law (vv. 2-4, 8), the construction of an altar (vv. 5-6a), the offering of sacrifices (vv. 6b-7), the recital of blessings and curses (vv. 9-14) and the text of a dozen curses to be recited and to which the people are to respond (vv. 15-26). Everything he ordered them to do seemed to be a little too dramatic: Large stones,

plastering, gathering of the whole assembly, reading of the whole law, sacrificing, the building of the altar, and the responses of the people. So many pieces had to be just so because Moses knew that the stakes were high. As all human beings, his people were prone to forgetting about God and to taking matters into their own hands, so Moses had to make sure that he gave them some solid instructions to keep them on track. The part that struck me the most in this story was the command to keep silent and to listen. They not only had to do all the things he told them to do, but they also had to be quiet and to listen. This was the key to living by the teachings of God. They could have had the biggest and best monuments. They could have built the best altar and sacrificed daily on it. But that would not have been enough. They had to be silent and listen. That was the key to their continued renewal. Staying on the path was only guaranteed if they listened to God on a regular basis.

The problem for most of us is that we are hardly ever truly silent because we live in a culture that is very uncomfortable with silence and internally we struggle with stillness. The Persian poet, Rumi, believed we are afraid of silence. He wrote, "Silence is the root of everything. If you spiral into its void, a hundred voices will thunder messages you long to hear." Poet Khalil Gibran explained and said: "Silence is painful, but in silence things take form, and we must wait and watch. In us, in our secret depth, lies the knowing element which sees and hears that which we do not see nor hear. All our perceptions, all the things we have done, all that we are today, dwelt once in that knowing, silent depth, that treasure chamber in the soul. And we are more than we think. We are more than we know. That which is more than we think and know is always seeking and adding to itself while we are doing – or think we are doing – nothing. But to be conscious of what is going on in our depth is to help it along. When subconsciousness becomes consciousness, the seeds in our winter-clad selves turn to flowers, and the silent life in us sings with all its might."

What does silence that leads to deep communion with God look like for us today? How do we keep silent and listen to the scriptures and to God speaking to us? What are the rituals that help us to open our hearts and souls to the words of life spoken to us each day and each moment by God?

Before refrigerators were invented, people used ice houses to preserve their food. During the winter, people cut large blocks of ice from the frozen lakes and streams. They hauled them to the ice houses and covered them with sawdust, so the ice wouldn't melt. The story is told of one man who lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it by carefully raking through the sawdust, so the ice wouldn't melt. But he didn't find it. Other people also looked for the watch, but they didn't find it either. One day a small boy slipped into the ice house during the noon hour. After a few minutes, he came back out with the watch in his hand. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. "It was simple," the boy replied. "I just closed the door, lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking." May you be blessed to learn the power of silence. Amen.