

***“The wrong kind of silence”***  
***Sermon on Sunday, August 31, 2025***

**Dear church,**

Let me begin where the gospel reading for this Sunday begins. A social event, an invitation to dinner at a nice place. The home of a prominent Pharisee, perhaps the equivalent of a prominent local politician. On his way there, Luke writes, Jesus is carefully watched, his every step is followed, every word paid attention to. That sounds... stressful! Perhaps you remember a moment and time when you were in the center of that kind of unwanted attention and people were watching you not with curiosity and kind regard but with skepticism, maybe looking for a reason to fire you, waiting for you to make a mistake or commit a blunder that they could exploit against you. It's a very uncomfortable scenario. It will make most people self-conscious and nervous. Jesus was being carefully watched - by whom? Likely by the experts in the law and the Pharisees whom he encounters almost immediately in this episode.

For many people this kind of nervous build-up, someone observing you, watching you, scrutinizing you would lead to changing one's approach. If I had been in Jesus' place for instance, I would have probably passed by the man with the swelling in the body. "Not today," I would have rationalized, "I know exactly what's going to happen. They are trying to get me." "Maybe I come back later when nobody is around," I would have soothed my conscience. Well, our Lord takes a different approach, a direct, frontal challenge aimed at the establishment, asking the million-dollar question openly, loudly, even when that question isn't up for debate and kind of taboo. Sometimes it's good to ask old questions with new curiosity, to see whether the old answers still hold up before God and the human conscience and whether a new, a better approach has not emerged as we learned from the past. Human beings are a learning species. We live by learning from our mistakes. We also die by not learning from them. And so, Jesus goes for it. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?"

Surprisingly, the people in charge of the law say nothing, nothing at all. Silence. They know well that there is a gaping hole between what's right in that situation and what's written in the old law. They don't want to be seen as rigid, but they are rigid. They don't want to be seen as uncaring in the face of human suffering, but the fact is they are. And so, they keep their mouths shut. Sometimes being quiet speaks volumes. Jesus, equipped with healing powers, tends to the man. He is still being watched. His actions are still under scrutiny. But what is more important to him is the gaze of God. Am I doing the right thing before my Father in heaven?

I believe there is a lot to learn just from this first part of the story, and frankly, it goes against my grandmother's wisdom. My grandmother Anna was fond of saying that silence is golden. There is a German saying, "Reden is Silber, Schweigen ist Gold." She often said that. It translates to, "Talking is silver but silence is golden." And I would say, not always. Sometimes being silent means becoming complicit in the injustices of your times. Sometimes speaking when everybody looks at you shows the courage to listen to your conscience and taking the difficult path, what Jesus also called the narrow road. Jesus models that in this passage.

And then he goes for more. It gets personal. Uncomfortably personal. People love that, right, when you take an abstract question and apply it to them, so they are morally exposed. I imagine he looked at them and asked sincerely, "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?" Silence. "If one of you has a family member working for an important science project funded by federal grants, would you not find a way to exclude them from the purging?" Silence. "If one of you had a child with a rare disease, would you not find a way to get research funding to find a cure?" In our family we have learned that medical professionals are often much more understanding, much more caring and helpful when they have dealt with prolonged illness in their own family. It is personal.

When we go from this part of the reading to the gospel in its entirety, one might conclude that it doesn't pay to open your mouth. After all, our Lord will be crucified. Many people at various times have concluded that it doesn't pay to open your mouth, especially under dictators. It should concern us that some seasoned political leaders in our own country have recently acknowledged - and repeatedly, "We are afraid to speak." Their families have received death threats, ugly messages, slander... But remember, the gospel does not end with the cross. It ends with the resurrection to new life and the call to serve and follow Jesus' example and the beginning of the church. So, let me end this homily with an adaptation of the Serenity Prayer. "May God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to speak when we can make a difference, and the wisdom to know when to be silent and when to speak."

Amen.