

Silence and Light, By Rev. Mark J.T. Caggiano, 2/8/26

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

This passage in Isaiah begins with a comparison. It is a contrast between true and false worship. To be focused on rituals and performing them correctly, even perfectly, as opposed to worshipping God faithfully. These are not the same forms of worship. For one is to be worried about appearances. And the other is to be concerned with what matters. What matters in the world. And what matters to God.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Fasting is to do without something. Not to eat or drink during an appointed time. But for what purpose? To what end? What is the goal?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Why go without eating if not to share that food with those who have none? Why go without luxuries if not to help those without necessities? Why act to gain God's favor in your life when God is asking us to assist others in their lives?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

This imagery is reflected in the Gospel reading. It is about light shared, not hidden away. Light lifted up high so others might be able to see.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Both Isaiah and Jesus are calling to the people of Israel to act in the world. To help others. To be the hands of God. And you cannot do any of that if you are hiding your light away from the world. For that light is not our own. It is the light of God passing through us to others.

Turning away for a moment from matters of light and seeing, let us consider matters of sound and speaking. Freedom of speech is a sincerely held belief, one jealously guarded and deeply cherished. But what about the opposite, the right of silence? The right to silence. There are such rights. But the question is: what should we do with them?

There are many versions of such a right. Perhaps the most well-known is the right to remain silent. Anyone having watched a police drama will have heard those famous words, "You have the right to remain silent." Usually, the issuing of this right is followed by efforts to dupe some perpetrator into giving up some bit of intelligence in a moment of taut dialogue and theatrical staging. But the idea of the right to remain silent is basic and is intended to prevent such moments of trickery or coercion.

The language of this right is not fixed in stone, no matter what they used on episodes of Law and Order. Here is one version: "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in court. You have the right to talk to a lawyer for advice before we ask you any questions. You have the right to have a lawyer with you during questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you before any

questioning if you wish. If you decide to answer questions now without a lawyer present, you have the right to stop answering at any time.”

The purpose of this language is to keep someone from becoming the source of information leading to their conviction, to be a witness against themselves as describe in the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. How might that sort of thing happen? It could be done with subtlety, as staged on television, or it could be done through threats or violence. Testimony obtained in such a fashion would be inadmissible in court and further evidence found using such information would also be legally suspect.

Some might object that this slows everything down, all this care and concern for the bad guys. But they are not *bad guys*. They are not bad guys in the eyes of the law. Innocent until proven guilty regardless of what the screenwriters might suggest. And innocence until proven guilty regardless of the expedience of roving packs of masked law enforcement officials looking to meet quotas rather than protecting and serving the needs of the people and their communities. But I digress.

This right to remain silent is at the root of the only criminal advice I ever give out on the blessedly rare occasions when someone asks for legal guidance as they sit in jail somewhere. I say: Don't talk to anyone about anything. And, for my next trick, I will now try to find you the name of a vaguely qualified lawyer to replace this immensely unqualified one.

This right to remain silent is personal. It is about protecting oneself against accusations by the state. Notice it has nothing to do with what happened. It is not intended to expedite anything. This right is individual and, one might argue, granted at the expense of the wider society. And yet the logic is that we are all safer from the coercive powers of the government because we cannot be forced to make a case against ourselves.

Silence can take other forms. Years ago, there was a controversy at sporting events over the National Anthem, which I mention on the day of the Super Bowl. Some players were protesting police violence and racial inequality in the United States by kneeling during the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner.

Many had done so, but the origin of the protest has been tied to Colin Kaepernick, a former member of the San Francisco 49ers, who basically had his career ruined for standing up for the rights of others. In this form of protest, rather than stand and sing, a player takes a knee, a rather common sight in American football.

It is interesting that this physical stance had created such controversy. I played football for years and taking a knee was often the time when we were expected to pay attention to our coaches. And it is similar to kneeling as if to pray, again a posture that serves to orient one's focus on something of great importance, not disrespect it.

But taking a knee, or kneeling, is not what you are supposed to do, what you are expected by custom to do during the anthem. You are supposed to stand up. You might place your hand over your heart. You might even sing. All of this is done in solidarity with those around you, a sign of your respect for the moment and perhaps one's patriotism for our country.

I will note in passing that visitors from other countries have remarked to me how fervent Americans are when it comes to such displays. You would not see people act this way in places like Spain or England. In fact, the practice in the United States goes back to the two world wars. It was an effort to kindle support for the war effort, one that has waxed and waned over the years. It flourished again during the Vietnam War and reached its greatest height after the September 11th attacks.

Historically, the right to keep silent in such moments has sparked controversies. Children who refused to recite the Lord's Prayer were beaten in classrooms. People who could not make oaths, like to become a public official, would be denied positions. Some religious denominations prohibit the making of oaths, such as Quakers or Jehovah's Witnesses, and they were on occasion excluded from jobs and even elected positions.

And speaking of Jehovah's Witnesses, there have been repeated social dustups over the Pledge of Allegiance. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance because it represents placing worldly authority before the authority of God. And yet state governments sought to enforce laws requiring children to say the Pledge every day.

If a child refused, they might be punished or sent home. If they were sent home, they could be declared truant. If they were declared truant, they could be sent to reform school. If they were sent to reform school, their parents could be fined or even sent to jail. And if any of that sounds too outlandish to be true, that very situation in the 1940s made it all the way to the Supreme Court from the State of West Virginia.

The Supreme Court declared that no one could be forced to speak. That we have the right to be silent even if all those around us would prefer that we speak, that we say some words in unison, whether they be prayers or a pledge or a song. We are not required to say anything. We have the right to remain silent.

Recall the scriptures this morning. Isaiah was comparing true and false worship, that which is meaningful with that which is for display only. We perform the rituals because we are required to do so, for public consumption, for appearance sake. Going to church to be seen. Making all the right gestures, the ups and downs, the choreography of worship. I have heard it referred to at the Holy Hokey-Pokey. Turn yourself around because that's what it is all about.

Is it? *Is that what it is all about?*

In case anyone here is worried about that, please do not be concerned. I can assure you, at least from a Unitarian perspective, your presence or absence here is not being tallied up in the merits and demerits columns in that great accounting house in the sky. The rituals we witness and perform here on Sundays, or Christmas or Easter or any other day, do not bend the heavens in our favor. If you want, I can write you a note, a lifelong get of jail free card, at least as to compulsory church attendance.

Honestly church should not seem like jail, a life sentence. It should not be a chore, dragging you out of a warm bed. Though I am glad you all did so especially after a storm. Church is not supposed to be a burden and if it ever seems so, let someone know. Like me. Because God does not care about the rituals, as we heard this morning.

Not that I am letting you off the hook entirely. Indeed, God does not care about the *rituals*. But God cares what you *do*.

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

We fast so we might know hunger. And knowing hunger, we should then go out to make others less hungry. We hear stories of healing so we might be reminded to heal. We listen to tales of helping the stranger and lessons about loving one's neighbor, so we will be reminded again and again what we are to do and to say as we go about our lives.

But how does any of that fit in with the right to remain silent? To refrain from speaking and acting? Well, simply put, America gave you that right. God didn't. God expects something else entirely.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Let your light shine before others. If you kept that idea at the forefront of your mind always, you might never *need* to set foot in church again. Because that light is an example. An example of deeds not creeds as the saying goes. An example of behavior over ritual. But we don't always do so, and thus here we are.

Like the right to remain silent, church is about you and me. It is a place of respite, of rest and reassurance and reminder. Rest from a hard world so we can go back out and serve as the hands of God. Reassurance that we are on the right track, comparing notes with others around us in faith and fellowship.

And reminders over and over again. Because we already know what we need to do – to help others. And we already know who those others are – friends and strangers, neighbors and enemies. We just need to be reminded once in a while.

One reason we come to church is because outside these doors, those lessons sometimes seem crazy. It is hard to imagine having to shoulder so many burdens when we might have so many of our own. At church, hopefully you can do so together occasionally.

But more so than shared efforts, you can find an anchor. An anchor in a stormy sea of worries and anxieties, expectations of concerns. An anchor holding you close to where you need to be, who you need to be. An anchor to God's love.

The right to remain silent takes various forms. The right to protect yourself one way and not another. The right to stay true to yourself and to avoid performing the roles others try to demand of us. And the right to express yourself in contrast to the world around us. To be contrary. To be independent. To even protest. Yes, to protest in a time when that precious right is at risk.

And what should we do *religiously*? Remember that God is not looking for the pageantry of rituals, the spectacle of worship. No praying in public, no burnt offerings.

As in the Book of Micah, God *does not* seek your temple offerings but your acts of loving kindness. To walk in the light and to share that light in the world. It is a great gift from God to, in the moment, become the answer to someone's heartfelt prayers.

So even as we are blessed, may we always be a blessing in this life and in the lives of others. Let us not be silent when it truly matters and for whom it truly matters. Amen.