

The Sound of Silence

I Kings 19:1-13

By

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June 20, 2010 — Father's Day

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Today is Father's Day. Erma Bombeck tells of receiving a letter from a single mother who had raised a son who was now about to become a father himself. Since he had no recollection of his own father, her question in the note was, "What do I tell him a father does?" Erma Bombeck lost her own father when she was nine years old, so she was also raised by her mother and had the same question. "What do fathers do?"

"As far as I could observe," she writes, "they brought the car around when it rained so everyone else could stay dry. They always took the family pictures, which is why they were never in them. They carved turkeys on Thanksgiving, kept the car gassed up, weren't afraid to go into the basement, mowed the lawn, and tightened the clothesline to keep it from sagging. It wasn't until my husband and I had children that I was able to observe firsthand what a father contributed to a child's life. What did he do to deserve his children's respect? He rarely fed them, did anything about their sagging diapers, wiped their noses or fannies, played ball or bonded with them under the hoods of their cars. What did he do?

He threw them higher than his head until they were weak with laughter. He cast the deciding vote in the puppy debate. He listened more than he talked. He let them make mistakes. He allowed them to fall from their first two-wheeler without having a heart attack. He read the newspaper while they were trying to parallel park a car for the first time in preparation for their driving test.

If I had to tell someone's son what a father really does that is important, it would be that he shows up for the job in good times and bad times. He's a man who is constantly being observed by his children. They learn from him how to handle adversity, anger disappointment, and success. He won't laugh at their dreams no matter how impossible they might seem. He will dig out at 1 a.m. when one of his children run out of gas. He will make unpopular decisions and stand by them. When he is wrong and makes a

mistake, he will admit it. He sets the tone for how family members treat one another, members of the opposite sex and people who are different than they are. By example, he can instill a desire to give something back to the community when its needs are greater than theirs.

But mostly, a good father involves himself in his kids' lives. The more responsibility he has for a child, the harder it is to walk out of his life. A father has the potential to be a powerful force in the life of a child. Grab it! Maybe you'll get a greeting card for your efforts. Maybe not. But it's steady work."¹

Erma Bombeck captured the sense of fatherhood's ideal from a generation ago in American culture. Today's families are different but they still provide the basic health, education, and welfare for the next generation. Governments will never be able to replace the family as the providers of basic necessities for children within the society. Parents can never give up! Fathers show up in good times and bad. And churches must never give up supporting parents and families, because churches are themselves extended families providing a place at the table for everyone who seeks to be a member of the family of Christ. We are all children of God intended to be part of the family that meets every week in worship, in good times and bad times.

Times of discouragement come upon us all, including fathers. The story of Elijah today tells of disappointment and even depression in the life of one who served as a prophet for the Lord. We all face periods when life doesn't unfold as we expect or want it to. Those who are close to God are no exception, sometimes experiencing times of disillusionment and discouragement. Some of us may begin to feel that life has passed us by. I'm not referring to a medical condition of depression that may require medication, among other treatments. We've learned a great deal in recent decades about the causes and treatment of depression. I want to talk today about discouragement, not clinical depression but that "blue" feeling that doesn't go away easily and can leave one incapacitated in some way.

In August of 2007, a new book emerged with letters from Mother Teresa written to her friends, superiors, and confessors about her doubts of faith. Shortly after beginning her work in Calcutta's slums, she wrote, "Where is my faith? Even deep down. . . there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. . . If there be a God – please forgive me." The letters were kept at the archbishop's house and were collected by a priest

¹ Bombeck, Erma, Associated Press Column published Father's Day, 1992.

who was in charge of making the case for proposed sainthood to the Vatican. When published, the letters revealed the inner life of an occasionally tormented soul.² The subtitle of an article written about the book uses this descriptive language: “Nun’s Letters Shows She Was Tormented by Her Doubts in Her Faith.” We all experience discouragement, and times when we doubt our faith, even Mother Teresa. Many were surprised to learn that such a paragon of faith, one who is being considered for sainthood, could express such depth of discouragement. One person who would not be surprised is Elijah.

Elijah had humiliated the prophets of Baal in a contest to show whose God was more powerful, more real, and more responsive to human need. The people were acclimating to the surrounding culture and their faith was becoming polluted by ideas that were antithetical to faith in God and the covenant established by their ancestors. During a drought they turned to Baal, the storm god of their neighbors to seek rain. They kept idols in the hopes that these inanimate objects might answer their prayers. Elijah spoke the word of the Lord and helped to turn them back to God. But it also meant he made some enemies for his troubles, especially anxiety producing were enemies with power like Queen Jezebel. Her threats led to Elijah’s attempt to enter a self-imposed “witness protection” program, hiding and seeking to change his identity. He had not bargained for this! This was not in the job description when he entered the ministry! They never told him about this at seminary. He returned to his own country, isolating himself, blowing things out of proportion, and wanting to cash in his chips and take up another line of work.

The first thing to notice in the story is that God is not unaware or unconcerned with Elijah’s discouragement, even though Elijah is unaware of the ways in which God is caring for him when all he knows is fear and anxiety. Through the lens of his fear things have been blown way out of proportion. He even convinced himself that he was the only one left, the only one in the fight against a culture headed for the cliff, the only one who has ever felt what he feels, the only one who needs to defend himself against an enemy. The reality is there are 7000 faithful who have not worshiped the false gods around them.

When we are discouraged and begin to throw our own self-pity party we tend to isolate ourselves and inevitably blow things out of proportion. God’s question to Elijah is this, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It’s not unlike the question to Adam,

² <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/08/23/eveningnews/main3199062.shtml> Singer, Michelle. “*Letters Reveal Mother Teresa’s Secret*” CBS Evening News August 23, 2007.

“Where are you?” It’s an existential question. It’s a clarifying question. And maybe it is something like the question the Lord might ask each of us this morning. “Where are you this morning, Jeff?” (Fill in your own name) “How is it that you came to be where you are today?”

In an age of constant noise, with iPads and emails and text messages, bombarded by advertisements all the time, the best way to get our attention is through silence. Some teachers I know, rather than trying to over-power a classroom of children by shouting will instead use a gesture in silence like raising a hand to get their attention. Rather than God not speaking to us, perhaps the problem is that we are not listening. Is God trying to get your attention this morning? Might the Lord be trying to coax you out of your cave of self-isolation (as he did Elijah) in order to show you his glory and re-commission you for service?

We will surely come to a time in life, as parents, on the job, as partners, in our volunteer work, when we will say to ourselves (if not others) “I didn’t bargain for this! I didn’t sign up for this! I had other plans for my life and I have no intention of paying the price that this commitment is about to exact from me!” You will be disillusioned. You will feel justified in throwing in the towel and leaving. You will see no other way forward, sooner or later, than to walk away. That is where character is built! That is when we learn to trust in God. Never give up! Listen carefully then for a Word from the Lord when you are at the end of your rope, the end of your insight, the end of what is humanly possible.

When we finally decide not to quit in life, or quit in faith, or quit our service to others, or quit our marriages, or quit on our children – God sees us through! And more than that; God re-commissions us and there is new joy and renewed energy even though life is hard work. The way forward is usually through the challenges, not around them or avoiding them. Avoiding the things we fear is no way to live. We move forward in life by moving toward what we hope for and believe in, rather than away from what we fear. God may not show himself in spectacular ways but the Lord will be present and faithful, on that you can depend. And in the silence you too may just be able to discern God’s nearness asking you “what are you doing here?” And if you’re honest in reply you also will find the strength and courage to live your life and keep your commitments. Winston Churchill, the former Prime Minister of England during the difficult years of World War II, was known for his elocution and passionate speeches. He was invited to speak at a graduation, which proved to be his last before his death. Churchill

lumbered up to the podium as everyone waited eagerly. He began his remarks by saying, "Never quit!" The audience waited for his next paragraph. He again said, Never Quit!" Figuring the introduction was now over and hanging on his every word, the audience heard him say a third time, "Never Quit!" Then he sat down. This was the sum total of his advice to those about to begin their adult lives.

My word to you today is "Never quit." Life will demand character as you face its challenges and very real dangers but the message of Elijah is that God is with you so never quit. Be faithful and live honorably. The Lord will provide. You too can claim along with the New Testament and believers throughout the centuries; "I am ready for anything through the strength of the one who lives within me."³ Thanks be to God!

Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

³ Philippians 4:13 JB Phillips Translation