

Sermon

January 15, 2023

"A Meditation on Silence"

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and source of life, and from Jesus, who makes God personal to each of us. Amen.

I wish my homily for you today was one of joy. It's not. I want you to know this ahead of time, because the Hymn of the Day is rather jubilant. So, there will be a time, as always, for silence and meditation between the end of the sermon and the Hymn of the Day. Just don't be *too* shocked when the Hymn of the Day comes on. It's a rather incredible hymn in honor of our theme this season, but it does not totally accord with the mood of the sermon itself. I'll explain why, as you'll see...

This sermon is about transforming silence and darkness, from pain and evil to the experience of the holy, the holy mystery.

Near the end of his life, the 20th century's greatest Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, wrote a short collection of meditations called "Encounters with Silence." In what follows I will share an abbreviated version of its most powerful chapter, which goes by the title "God of the Living." As I read, I want you to notice how Rahner turns the painful silence of loss, which all of us have experienced, into something good, namely, as the means by which God draws us out of ourselves, strengthening our longing for God, and thus deepening our relationship *with* God.

Listen for that.

As I anticipate, the deepest loss I may ever know in my life, the death of my mother, I will close with a few observations about the reading, and how Rahner shows us, if not how to make peace with silence and darkness, at least how to experience God in and through them.

"I should like to remember my dead to you, oh Lord," Rahner writes, "all those who belong to me and have now left me."

"There are many of them, far too many to be taken in with one glance. If I am to pay my sad greeting to them at all, I must rather travel back in memory over the entire route of my life's long journey."

(Think about that for a moment. For those of you who are raised in a church tradition, including this one, think about all the people you've met over the course of your life and church, all the people; I think of my home congregation back in California, a small town with a small Lutheran Church, and all the decent, good people I met growing up in that faith community, many of whom now are gone.)

“When I look back in this way,” Rahner continues, “I see my life is a long highway, (great image!) filled by a column of marching people (picture that...) every moment someone breaks out of the line and goes off silently, without a word or wave of farewell, to be swiftly enwrapped in the darkness of night. Stretching out on both sides of the road. (You see that?)

“The number of marchers gets steadily smaller and smaller, for the new people coming up to fill the ranks are really not marching in my column at all. True, there are many others who travel the same road, but only a few are traveling with *me*. For the only ones making this pilgrimage with me are those with whom I set out together. The ones who were with me at the very start of my journey to you, my God, the dear ones who were, and still are, close to my heart.’

“The others are mere companions of the road, who happened to be going the same way as I. Indeed, there are many of them, and we all exchange greetings and help each other along. But the *true* procession of my life consists only of those bound together by *real love*. And this column grows ever shorter and more quiet, until one day I myself will have to break off from the line of march and leave without a word or wave of farewell, never more to return.”

“That’s why my heart is now with them,” Rahner continues, “with my loved ones who have taken their leave of me.” (Doesn’t that resonate with you?) “There is no substitute for them. There are no others who can fill the vacancy when one of those whom I have really loved suddenly and unexpectedly departs and is with me no more. In True Love, no one can replace another, for True Love loves the other person in the depth where he or she is unique, and irreplaceably him or herself. And thus, as death has trod roughly through my life,” (You can really hear Rahner at the end of his life, thinking out loud) “every one of the departed has taken a piece of my heart with him, and often enough, my whole heart.”

“Thus, I am living now with the dead, with those who have gone before me into the dark night of death where no person can work. But how can I really live with the dead? How can I continue to find life in the one bond left between us, the bond of our mutual love?

Deign to answer me, Oh God! For you have called yourself “the God of the living and not of the dead.” How can I live with the dead? How can I live with those who have wandered off the highway into the darkness that aligns it?

“They have gone away; they are silent. Not a word comes through from them; not a single sign of their gentle love and kindness comes to warm my heart.

(I think about, after the first hard death I experienced, asking God for a sign. I wanted so desperately for my hope to be confirmed. It was outside my seminary that I was attending in Berkeley. I was the last one out of the sanctuary after a very large funeral for the president, who was my mentor; I was his teaching assistant. And I walked outside, asked for a sign. And what I saw was so subtle, just like silence; just a breeze combing the eucalyptus trees. There's something of God in that, I felt, not a direct sign, but a subtle sign... In many cases, however, not a single sign of those we have lost comes to warm our hearts.)

Do they want me to forget them, Rahner asks, as one forgets a fleeting acquaintance he made on a train, a stranger with whom he once exchanged a few friendly but meaningless words?

If it's true that those who have departed in *your* love, Rahner says to God, have not really lost their life, but had it transformed into eternal limitless super abundant life, *then why do I perceive no sign?*

But why am I asking this of you, God? You are as silent to me as the dead. I love you too, as I love my dead, the quiet and distant ones who have entered into the night... and yet not even You give me an answer when my loving heart calls upon you for a sign that you and your love are present to me.

How can I complain about my dead when their silence is only echo of yours? Or can it be that your silence – and this is the pivot in the sermon, the turning point – Or can it be, Rahner realizes, “that your silence is your *answer* to my complaint about theirs? “That must be the way it is,” Rahner continues, “since you are the last answer, even though incomprehensible, to all the questions of my heart!

“I know why you are silent. Your silence is the framework of my faith, the boundless space where my love finds the strength to believe in your love.

“Frankly” he explains, “if it were perfectly evident to me here on Earth, if your love of me were so clear, so manifest that I could ask no more anxious questions about it, if you had made absolutely crystal clear, the most important thing about me, namely that I am someone loved by you, oh God – how then, could I prove the daring courage and fidelity of my love? How can I even *have* such love? How could I lift myself up in the ecstasy of faith and charity and transport myself out of this world into your world, into your hidden heart?”

Martin Luther puts this another way: He says “If God were directly observable, there would be no reason for faith.” Rahner is saying something like that here. The silence of God has a purpose, and that purpose, as you'll hear now, is to draw us out of ourselves to the loving God who is the source of our longing:

“Your love has hidden itself in silence,” Rahner says, “so that my love can reveal itself in faith. You have left me so that I can discover you. (Think about that – “You have left me so that I can discover you.”)

“If you were with me, then in my search for you, I would always discover only myself. But I must go *out of myself* if I am to find you, and find you there, where you can be yourself. “

(So again, it’s the silence of God that *draws us out of ourselves* and forms the loving relationship we have with God – one we often name as Faith.

“That is how my dead imitate your silence; they remain hidden from me because they have entered into *your* life. The words of their love no longer reach my ears, because they’re conjoined with the jubilant song of your endless love. My dead live the unhampered and limitless life that you live! They love with your love, and thus their life and their love no longer fit into the frail and narrow frame of my present existence.”

(What a promise!)

“And that is also the way they live for me.(Listen closely.) Their silence is their loudest call to me, because it is the echo of Your silence, Oh God. Their voice speaks in unison with Yours, trying to make itself heard above the noisy tumult of our incessant activity, competing with the anxious protestations of mutual love with which we poor humans try to reassure each other. Against all this, their voice and Yours strive to enwrap us and all our words in Your eternal silence.”

“Thus your Word summons us to enter into your life.” (So, you might think of this as God’s *unspoken* Word.) Thus you command us to abandon ourselves by the daring act of love (that is to say, reaching out, which is faith,) “so that we may find our eternal home in your life. And thus I am called and commanded by the silence of my dead, who live your life and therefore speak your word to me, the Word of the God of Life, so far removed from my dying. They are silent because they live! Just as we chatter so loudly, to try to make ourselves forget that we are dying.”

“They are silent because they live, just as we chatter so loudly to try to make ourselves forget that we are dying. Their silence is really their call to me. The assurance of their immortal love for me.”

And Rahner concludes, “Oh silent God, God of the silent dead, Living God of the living, who calls to me through silence – Oh God of those who are silently summoning me to enter into your life: never let me forget my dead, my living. May my love and faithfulness to them be a pledge of my belief in you, the God of eternal life!

Oh God of the living, may Your living not forget me, as I still walk in the valley of death. You have granted them everything, even Yourself. Grant them this too, that their silence may become the most eloquent word of their love for me.”

(Isn't that something? How? The silence of God, the silence of those who have passed away, calls us to them. Have you ever heard God speak through silence? If you have, Rahner would be an ally.)

“May it lead me to the home, the Kingdom they now possess, to the life and light they now enjoy. My waning life” – and this is the old Rahner now writing, “is becoming more and more life with the dead. I live more and more with those who have gone before me into the dark night, where no person can work.”

By your life-giving grace, oh Lord, let it become ever more a life of faith in your light shining not dimly in this earthly night. Let me live with the living, who have preceded me in the sign of faith who have gone before me into the bright day of eternal life, where no man need work, because You Yourself are this day, the fullness of all reality. the God of the living.

Oh my soul, never forget the dead. Oh God of all the living, do not forget me, the dead one, but come one day to be my life, as You are theirs.”

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How does Rahner, in this essay, in this reflection, this meditation, turn the painful and deafening silence of loss into something positive?

One way to answer that is to consider briefly his view of what it means to be human. For Rahner, to be human is to be in a state of perpetually reaching out, in everything from acts of knowledge and our search for truth, as well as acts of love and charity. Religion, the Christian religion, Rahner claims, brings this natural tendency all of us have into conscious expression, especially as evident through prayer.

We find ourselves perpetually reaching out for something that can ultimately satisfy us. And religion answers that by saying, “This ‘something’ is God.”

We're built for it.

And that something, that infinite horizon, is the Divine. We're oriented in that direction. Whenever the perpetual reaching out is frustrated or cramped, as it is in Sunday Schools where people say, “Don't wonder, just believe; Don't ask those questions,” whenever that's frustrated, our relationship with the divine is affected accordingly.

The silence of God as well as our deceased loved ones deepens and enhances our reaching out toward God. We long for those we have lost, don't we?

I think about this often. How in the future I know I'll be wondering if I could just have one more day with my mom.

Don't you think that too? If I could just have one more day with that person.

The silence, however, has a reason here, or a purpose. It beckons us. It calls us. It lures us out of ourselves. Now make no mistake: Death, as Paul says, is still the enemy of God. But God, through holy silence, can use something even as horrible as death for the good! Namely, to draw us out of ourselves, in loving relationship and longing, towards God and those who have left us.

Now I must confess, I don't want to relate in the near future to my mother this way.

I want her here.

But rethinking silence and darkness may at least give me strength to face what lies ahead. The silence and the darkness may be the very means by which God draws you and me more out of ourselves, into relationship with Him.

We have a name for this relationship. We call it faith. And what does faith do, according to our first and second readings? It gives us strength and courage to face the unknown.

"My God has become my strength" we read in Isaiah 49:5.

"He will also strengthen you to the end," writes the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:8.

God, for these authors, does not solve our problems for us, but God does give us courage and strength to face them.

That is the promise: that even in the face of death and loss, where the ones we love are now silent, the human spirit finds its strength in the one for which it longs. God calls us out of ourselves through holy silence, deepening that relationship we have with God.

May God grant us the strength, and in the days ahead, may God grant it to me.

Amen