

Knowing When to Keep Quiet
Isaiah 53:7
5th Wednesday in Lent
March 13, 2013

Open mouth – insert foot. Sound familiar? We've all done it at one time or another. We have all said things when it would have been best for us simply to keep quiet.

I have permission to tell you about a time when I did such a thing. Suzanne and I were at my brother's house. Somehow the conversation turned to how much each of us weighed. When Suzanne gave her weight, I objected saying she couldn't possibly weigh as much as she claimed. She invited me to join her at the bathroom scales. The scales proved me wrong and I said, "My goodness, you are quite a little porkchop."

Keeping quiet isn't a popular virtue in today's world. This generation may be the loudest, noisiest, brashest generation that has ever inhabited the face of the earth. Today, the energy of all the television and radio signals emitted from the earth exceeds the tremendous output of the wavelengths from the sun.

Someone on a distant planet listening to our solar system with a radio telescope wouldn't hear the sun, but the loud static of us humans on earth. Our world is full of noise from man and his machines, with loud music, vehicles, airplanes, and equipment all adding to the din.

All this noise has a price. Many homeowners living near large, metropolitan airports have filed lawsuits, claiming that all the airport noise has lowered their property values, and it probably has. Sound deadening walls are being built between busy highways and residential neighborhoods.

Yet the greatest damage is done by the sounds emitted by that small but powerful organ, the tongue. Consider what James says about the tongue: *Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness*

(James 3:5-9 NIV).

It's our tongue that gets us into trouble when we don't keep quiet. Who could possibly count all of the sins we commit with our tongues? Sins against the Second Commandment are the misuse and profaning of God's holy name. Who could keep track of all the curses uttered in our streets and even in our homes? Who could number the times when individuals have frivolously called for God to damn other people, not caring that hell truly does exist and those who are damned are consigned to torment there for eternity?

With the tongue we curse people, whom God had originally created in his own image, and people for whom Christ has died so they might not be damned, but be saved. James goes on to say, “*Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be*” (James 3:10 NIV).

Consider our transgressions against the Fourth Commandment: words of disrespect for the father and mother who brought us into this world and nurtured us with love. We may have uttered words that wounded their hearts and pierced their souls.

The Fourth Commandment also extends to all in authority – our boss, our government and its leaders, and all those whom God has placed over us. Instead of biting our lips and keeping quiet when we should, how often have we been insolent? Sometimes we get away with it. But occasionally the boss overhears the whispered conversation, sees the incriminating memo or nasty e-mail, and the words come back to haunt us.

However, perhaps the Commandment most often violated by our words is the Eighth Commandment: “*Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness*” (Ex 23:1 NIV). Churches are often breeding grounds for gossip. Just because something is true doesn’t give us license to blab it around when it harms our neighbor.

Moreover, gossip tends to spawn unkind and untrue stories. We make uncharitable judgments about people’s motives, misinterpret their actions, defame their character, harm their reputation, and smear their good name. Instead of putting the best construction on things, how much more fun – how much more tantalizing and titillating it is – to put the worst construction on things. How tempting it is to put a new twist on the story, to bend the boring truth just enough to keep it interesting, instead of keeping quiet like we know we should.

We need to learn to keep quiet. This is true in our relationships with other people and in our relationship with God. We need times of quietness before God. God likes to hear our prayers, but he also likes for us to simply keep quiet and listen to him. In Psalm 46:10, God tells us, “*Be still, and know that I am God.*”

Scripture tells us about our suffering Savior, whose silence atoned for all our sins of speech. No one in the history of the world has had more reason to complain than Jesus. But instead of protesting when *He was oppressed, and afflicted. He did not open His mouth* (Is 53:7). Tonight’s verse repeats that last line to drive home the point: “*He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*”

When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, he could have called on his Father to send twelve legions of angels to fight off the mob, yet Jesus kept quiet. When false accusations were brought against him by false witnesses during his trials before Caiaphas, the high priest, and, Pontius Pilot, the Roman governor, Jesus made no reply. In agony on the cross, Jesus suffered silently, uttering only seven brief sentences.

Jesus kept the Second Commandment. He didn't misuse God's name by calling for God to damn those, who deserved it. As Jesus suffered in agony, he didn't curse those who crucified him. Instead, he prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34 NIV). Jesus silently laid down his life as an offering, so that those who had lost the image of God might be restored to that righteous image by God's grace delivered through his righteous Son.

Jesus kept the Fourth Commandment by respecting those in authority – despite their sin of condemning a just man. Jesus had good reason to address some choice words to Caiaphas, as the false witnesses brought false accusations of nonexistent sins against Jesus.

He certainly would have been justified had he expressed contempt for the Pontius Pilate – the coward who tried to wash his hands and evade responsibility for his own decision – the decision to set the murderer Barabbas free, and sentence innocent Jesus to death. But Jesus respected Pilate's God-given authority as a government official: "*You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above*" (Jn 19:11 NIV). During his trial before Pilate, Jesus kept silent.

Jesus also kept the Eighth Commandment. Jesus could have spoken tremendous criticism of others. He knew full well their sins of word and deed. He associated with tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners. Yet Jesus didn't spread gossip or rumors about them, even though it would have been the truth.

When people brought the woman caught in adultery before Jesus, He said, "*[I do not] condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.*" (Jn 8:11 NIV). Instead of calling for her execution as the Law allowed, Jesus held his speech and acquitted her.

God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world (Jn 3:17). Jesus could have spent his entire earthly life uttering words of damnation. Instead, he spoke words of salvation and consolation. And when the time came for Jesus to lay down his life as the ransom for our sins – including our sins of speech – Jesus kept quiet. The Lamb of God went to the slaughter willingly and silently.

Jesus suffered in silence to make up for all the times when we should have kept quiet, but we didn't. Jesus' wordless suffering atoned for all our cursing, our shouting, our disrespectful words, our gossip and slander. Jesus' willing silence has made payment for all the times we have put our foot in our mouth – for our careless words, our hasty speech, our nasty quips, our rash talk.

During this Lenten season, ponder in respectful silence what Jesus Christ has done for us. Take it all in without speaking. Though we may feel we have good reason to complain – though we may be maligned, mistreated, misquoted – Christ shows us how not to sin with our tongues. His forgiveness grants us grace, so that we might hold our tongue.