

“Quiet for an Anxious World”

Psalm 46:10 Ephesians 4:29

It’s an honor and a joy to speak to you today as your fellow Rotarian, but I want to start with a confession. Seven years ago when I moved to Tifton, I had never heard of Rotary. I guess you could say I didn’t exactly grow up in a Rotary family. My dad was a loving, mild-mannered French and Spanish teacher at Valdosta State, and my mom was an LPN at her brother’s medical practice. We were hard working folks—the type to be heavily involved in church, cub scouts, and school music activities—but we weren’t exactly the type to sign up for Rotary.

But when St. Anne’s called me at the ripe old age of 29 to be their senior pastor (for which I still think they were crazy), I was immediately approached by parishioners like Syd Blackmarr, Marion Curry, and Jeff Gibbs, all of whom said, “Father Lonnie, you should consider becoming a Rotarian.” “A Ro-*what*-ian?” I asked. “A Rotarian,” they said. It was Jeff who put it most honestly and succinctly: “You need to join the Rotary so people in town will know who the heck you are.”

Having been a member of the club for seven years now, I suppose there’s no way to really measure the extent to which it has generated good news, good press, or good will for me or my congregation, but I do know this: when I leave here on Wednesdays—whether the speaker was interesting or not, whether the fried chicken was good or not, whether Gary Kincaid behaved himself with his jokes or not—I leave here with a tremendous sense of friendship and community. Not “community” in the business-networking sense of the word, but *real* community . . . the kind that gives you a deep down assurance that you live in a good time, in a good place, with good people. We don’t acknowledge that enough, and we don’t give thanks for it enough. If I say nothing else today, it’s worth my time to say “thank you” to all of you for the myriad ways in which you make Tifton such a lovely place to live. Thank you.

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So, why am I speaking today? Well, over the past seven years several of you have asked, “Father Lonnie, wouldn’t you just love to give a talk at Rotary?” Every time I’ve responded, “No way!” (You know the Program Chair is running low on options when he or she starts calling on the preachers.) The thing is, I talk for a living, but the kind of talking I do is the kind you hear on Sunday mornings. What could I possibly have to say to my fellow Rotarians that they don’t already hear in their own houses of worship on the weekends?

As many of you know, though, I went away this past summer for a pre-planned, three-month sabbatical—something encouraged for all Episcopal clergy at least every seven years—and for those three months, I lived in total silence. No talking, no TV, no Internet, no cell phone, no texting, no nothing. For three months, *Lonnie Lacy gave up talking*, and somehow, out of that experience, I think I finally have something to say.

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I've entitled this talk "Quiet for an Anxious World," and with that title in mind I want to take a straw poll. How many of you here would agree that we live in anxious times in an anxious world? [*Nearly every hand went up.*] Describe it however you want—divided, distracted, distressed—but I tend to think there is no better descriptor for our current culture than the word "anxious." And to be clear, I'm not just talking about the fact that we're in an election season. Our current anxieties certainly include Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, but it's deeper and more personal than that.

When I say we live in an anxious world, I'm talking about *all* of us. I'm talking about the rat races we're running. I'm talking about the stress of balancing personal life, family life, professional life, church life, and civic life. I'm talking about raising young children, caring for aging parents, and never feeling like we're getting it totally right. I'm talking about Facebook, Twitter, and all the strange new ways in which we're trying to keep up with the Joneses. I'm talking about the endless need to portray a perfect life while suspecting deep down that it's all falling apart. I'm talking about feeling like there's never enough: never enough time, never enough money, never enough success, never enough . . . whatever.

I know exactly how all this feels. (Contrary to what you might assume, pastors are especially susceptible to over-work and over-worry.) So when it came time to plan my sabbatical, my immediate thought was that I needed to *produce*. I thought I needed to go off and create something extraordinary and new. Write that book no one else has written. Create that church program no one else has created. I thought I needed to *prove* myself. Thank goodness I called my friend Liam, an Episcopal priest in Savannah, to ask his advice.

"Liam, what should I do?" I asked. "Oh Lonnie," he said in his Irish accent. "You're so driven to create. Like all the rest of us, your head is so filled with the nonsense and noise of the world. I'm telling you: forget trying to produce something. Instead, at a minimum, I recommend three weeks of total silence. Does that scare you?" "No, it sounds wonderful," I replied, "but I have three *months* to fill. What do I do after the three weeks of silence?" "You keep at it," he said, "because by then you'll have gotten good at it. And somewhere along the way, you'll begin to hear God's voice on the other side of silence."

So I followed my friend's advice and decided to take a three-month vow of silence. The first month I spent at a Catholic Jesuit retreat center in Atlanta, and the other two months I lived with Noah—my faithful Labrador Retriever—in a cabin on Pine Mountain. While there are so many things I could tell you about the fruits of those three months, what I wish to share with you today are six surprising, soul-mending benefits to silence that I discovered along the way.

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1. Silence presses the reset button on our brains. More and more studies show that our brains are being rewired in an unhelpful way by the constant noise of our modern day society. When I say "noise," I mean the distractions we face every day: 24-hour cable news; meetings heaped upon meetings; constant phone calls, emails, and texts; hours and hours of podcasts and binge-worthy TV shows. Our brains were not designed to keep up with the barrage.

I was amazed—downright *amazed*—when just twenty-four hours after walking away from the noise, I found myself sitting on a deck at the retreat center in Atlanta and felt the tension pull away from my face like the lifting of a veil. Just *twenty-four hours* of quiet was all it took to begin a change in me, both spiritually and physiologically. I don't think I had truly understood or appreciated the disfiguring tension I had been carrying on my face until that very moment. Since my return, several of you have commented, "Wow Lonnie, you look different. You looked *horrible* before you left (thanks y'all), but now you look refreshed, happy, calm." Just twenty-four hours of quiet with God was enough to press the reset button on my heart, soul, and mind and to begin to bring me back to myself.

2. Silence reminds us that we are not in charge of the universe. Like all the rest of us, I feel the constant weight of the many responsibilities in my life, and it's dangerously easy to fall into the trap of believing that it's all up to me. Not long after I had entered into the silence, one of the priests at the retreat center told me, "Today I want you to contemplate Psalm 46:10: 'Be still and know that I am God.'" I scoffed a bit at this since, to me, that verse has become so overused and familiar that it often reads more like an old bumper sticker than a stalwart scriptural support. But as I let those words roll over me throughout the day, I ended up hearing from God what I can only describe as a special translation of that age-old verse, just for me:

Stop trying to make it all perfect.
 Stop trying to make it all.
 Stop trying to make it.
 Stop trying.
 Stop.

There's a lot of grace in being reminded that the world is not yours to conquer. That you don't have to get it all right. That there's more to life than "making it." In fact, at some point in late July I realized that if my church were falling apart in my absence—if I were truly indispensable—they would have been in touch. *I could die on this mountain today*, I thought, *and it would be okay. The church would march on. My family would march on. The world would march on.* There's a word for this: humility. And with that kind of humility comes the ability to see everything for what it truly is: *pure gift*.

3. Silence allows us to think. Silence gives us space to think long, beautiful, undistracted thoughts, something we don't do enough of these days.

We live in a complex world, yet we have created a culture of sound bites and retorts, of jabs and tweets. We love it when people are able to make a quick comeback, or when they take someone down with nothing more than 140 characters. On top of that, we are bonded with our phones, distracted at every turn by pings, dings, and cell phone rings. There's even such a thing as "phantom vibration syndrome" where people are so attuned to feeling their phones vibrate that they reach for them in their pockets even when their phones are nowhere near them.

What would it be like to carve out time every day to set certain things aside—to set the Internet, our smart phones, our TVs all aside—and to say, "This . . . this is not me. I am distinct and different from this. I might allow this to *inform* me, but I will not allow it to *form* me." I can

tell you what it's like. It's freedom. It's time to think. To pray. To listen. To daydream. To be creative. To hear something original and new. We've been given these extraordinary brains, and I am convinced that God did not design them to think only in segmented, unoriginal, tweet-length thoughts. Silence gives us room to dream, and dream big.

4. Silence reduces chronic suspicion. And boy, what a suspicious time we live in. These days it seems we're never really sure who we can trust. We're never really certain who is telling us the truth. Trust is low, and chronic suspicion is high.

During my first week at the retreat center, one of the priests asked, "Going for a walk?" I nodded a silent yes in reply. "Look out for snakes!" he said. As you can imagine, I spent the rest of the summer with my eyes glued to the path, high-steppin' everywhere, terrified of being attacked by a diamondback or a copperhead.

But the thing is, when you're continually worried about being bitten, *everything* looks like a snake. I ended up walking and hiking nearly 500 miles over this summer, but it wasn't until near the end that I stopped and realized how much I had been missing. In all my downcast vigilance, I had failed to look up and see the beauty all around me. That day, I took my eyes off the path, gazed up, and found myself under the most stunning, endless canopy of longleaf pines. It was glorious, and from then on I made sure to look up and drink in the goodness on every side.

They say that when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. In the same way, when all you have is suspicion and mistrust, no one looks like a friend, and every stick becomes a snake.

5. Silence makes room for gratitude. If all you're ever doing is running around and putting out fires, it's easy to lose sight of the great giftedness of the life God has given us and to view everything and everyone as a burden. Silence gives us room to slow down, breathe, count our blessings, and gain perspective.

In my Tuesday morning adult Bible study, I *force* our participants to start by naming something for which they're grateful; otherwise it's just too darn easy to mire down in doom and gloom. Yesterday, after a bit of silence, one woman said, "Isn't it so wonderful that we live in such a great country filled with loving people ready and willing to help one another in the face of difficulty?" She was referring, of course, to people's generous response to Hurricane Matthew, and I was grateful for the perspective. If you watched the presidential debates on Sunday night, you might have had a very different idea about our "country filled with loving people," yet she—out of the silence—reminded us of the greater and nobler truths we so badly needed to hear.

6. Most importantly, silence creates a space in which God can speak. Perhaps it goes without saying, but for me the true benefits of this experience actually had nothing to do with the silence itself. The silence was merely the medium . . . the meeting place . . . the canvas on which God was able to write out a great love letter for me. If you are the type of person who believes in God, all I can really say is that finding time to be quiet goes a long, long way in allowing God to get a word in edge-wise. We need that probably more than we need anything else in this world.

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I want to end by addressing a common question and tying it to something we Rotarians hold very dear.

Many have asked, “Did you really avoid *all* speech?” The answer, which may surprise you, is *no*. It was inevitable that I would encounter people along the way: the checkout clerk at the Piggly Wiggly, the maintenance man at the cabin, a fellow hiker on the mountain trail. The basic rule I adopted was this:

Speak only when it is a generous act of hospitality to do so.

Actually, wouldn’t that be a good rule for *all* of life? It reminded me all summer of a Bible verse first shared with me by the late, great coach of the Valdosta High School Wildcats, Nick Hyder. During my freshman year at Valdosta High, Coach Hyder impressed upon me the importance of Ephesians 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

As a Rotarian, this should call to mind the Four-Way Test, which we display here every week. The Four-Way Test was developed in the 1930’s by a businessman named Herbert Taylor who was trying to save his failing aluminum company. *If I can get my employees to think the right things*, he thought, *it will follow that they’ll do the right things*. He searched many books for just the right ethical standard, but the words ultimately came in the silence of prayer. He pulled out a white paper card and wrote down the following twenty-four words:

- Is it the truth?
- Is it fair to all concerned?
- Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
- Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

In other words, **when we speak, is it a generous act of hospitality to do so?** If not, perhaps silence is the more excellent way. You and I cannot reduce *all* the unnecessary noise in the world, but we can at least reduce the unnecessary noise that falls from our own mouths.

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These are anxious times in an anxious world, but I remain convinced now more than ever that the world is still *good*. Noisy, distracted, suspicious, yes . . . but still very, very good. My hope for you—for *all* of us—is that we can make time to find a little more silence in our lives. That we can rest our hearts and minds and lay aside some of our nagging fears. That we can stop running ourselves ragged in the endless pursuit of “enough.” That we can take daily stock of the blessings that surround us on every side, even those that seem at first like burdens.

Friends, we are swimming in an ocean of good. I for one am glad and grateful to be swimming in it with people like you. Thank you.