Not all that long ago we were entertaining guests on our back deck. As we started to serve appetizers, the lawn company caring for the yard behind us arrived with 3 large mowing machines and at least that many gas powered, mega-super-charged weed trimmers. The noise from all of this equipment was deafening; it was virtually impossible to enjoy conversation much less food on the deck as the yard crew was working behind us, but when they finished and the machines were turned off there was this most wonderful sound: silence…silence with only the gentle babbling of our pond’s waterfall softly serenading us. That was in fact a golden silence.

While sometimes silence in our lives can indeed be golden, there are also times when silence may seem a little eerie or uncomfortable too. When Hurricane Sandy arrived, I was home alone with my dog. As I remember now, the electricity in my neighborhood went out sometime after dark. In the pitch blackness of my house, there was also virtually no noise, at least no human-made noise: no television blaring with up-to-the-minute weather reports, no refrigerator motor running, no computer fan whirring, no radio music…only the sound of the wind hurlding by and the poplars behind my house swaying, all occasionally punctuated by the sound of breaking limbs in the neighborhood. It was an eerie, uncomfortable silence.

But silence sometimes isn’t just eerie, it can in fact, be deafening. Waiting for a very late teenager to arrive home when it’s long past curfew and you’ve not had a text or phone call…that’s a deafening silence, isn’t it? Sitting in a surgical waiting room waiting for a status update on a loved one going through life threatening surgery…that silence too can be deafening. And then, praying to God, and not getting an answer. That may be the most deafening sound of silence of all. And that’s the deafening sound of silence that the Canaanite woman experienced so long ago.

As the story from Matthew opens, Jesus has just concluded a confrontation with some religious leaders over tradition. The religious leaders accuse Jesus and his followers of not keeping tradition, of not doing things the way we’ve always done them, and Jesus in turn, accuses them of keeping tradition at the expense of God’s commandments. Following this, Jesus journeys to the region of Tyre and Sidon, an area that some good religious folks almost considered a “toxic waste” area filled with the religiously impure. It was a place that the
traditionalists Jesus has just sparred with – the “we’ve always done it this way” crowd – would have never gone to. But Jesus went there.

Once there Jesus is practically accosted by a Canaanite woman. His disciples, and for that matter all of the law abiding religious folks of Jesus’ culture, were likely horrified by the spectacle that ensues. This Canaanite woman – someone who by her nationality, by her religion, by her history, by her culture, would have been assumed to be totally outside the boundaries of God’s love, breaks all kinds of social conventions and dares to come to Jesus for healing for her demon-possessed daughter. And in a world where women were expected to approach a man with great respect and tact and to be very reserved in public settings, this woman breaks that boundary too. Her daughter is in desperate need and as a mother, she will do whatever it takes to get Jesus’ attention and get Jesus’ healing.

Having faith that not only could Jesus heal her daughter, but having faith that God intends mercy for all, and that God’s mercy extends far beyond the boundaries of Israel, she comes to Jesus shouting at him – literally shrieking at him. No, there’s nothing reserved or polite about her plea. She’s desperate.

But Jesus doesn’t respond. He’s silent.

Surely she doesn’t experience this as a golden silence, or even an uncomfortable or eerie silence. It is in fact the deafening sound of silence to her ears. She keeps shouting though, perhaps with the decibel level of her voice rising with each passing shriek.

But Jesus remains silent. Deafeningly silent.

Finally fed up with her shrieks, tired of the noise this heathen woman is making, tired of the boundaries she is crossing, the disciples ask Jesus to send her home. Although Jesus doesn’t send her home, he does explain to his disciples why he is ignoring her: his mission is to the house of Israel and she is quite clearly an outsider to that household.

While Jesus was not speaking to her but to the disciples, she apparently overhears what he is saying and at this point kneels down before him…kneels down as the magi had done some 3 decades prior at his birth…she kneels down and begs…“Lord, help me.”

Now Jesus breaks his silence, saying to her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

If his utter silence earlier was deafening, one has to wonder what is going on in her mind and heart when Jesus compares her and her people to dogs. But instead of giving up, and with great faith that God’s mercy extends far beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community even if Jesus isn’t quite grasping that at the moment, and with the tenacity of a mother with a very sick child, she is not going to take “no” for an answer.
"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table."

"Great is your faith," he says to her. And, he heals the Canaanite woman’s daughter, immediately.

In many ways this story sounds strange to our ears. Jesus doesn’t seem to be acting much like Jesus. And truly, Christians through the ages have wondered if he intended to heal the woman all along or if he changed his mind during this encounter. Did he heal her child because of her faith, or because she badgered him and “bested” him in a debate?

I don’t think he healed the child because she badgered or “bested” him. And, I’m not sure that Jesus intended to heal the child at the beginning. But I do think that her great faith in the wideness of God’s mercy, and her faith in the amazing grace of God meant for all — a faith that endured even when she encountered the deafening sound of silence — spoke to Jesus loudly and expanded his understanding of the boundaries of his mission. Yes, he was Jewish man. Yes, he was the Jewish messiah. But as the Jewish messiah, his mission and his ministry extended to all the world. This outsider, this one whose voice would have been totally dismissed by the good religious people of the day, helped Jesus see that the boundaries of his mission was much bigger, and far broader than he had ever before considered and that it included even those who were the consummate outsiders.

I think we’ve all knelt alongside the Canaanite woman at one time or another. Or, at least, I can tell you I have. We’ve prayed, and God has been silent, deafeningly so. We’ve had a desperate need, taken that to God, and it feels as if either God is not listening to us, or that God is avoiding us, or that God is simply not responding to us. Regardless of how much and how long and how hard we pray, God does not always heal our bodies. Despite our pleas God does not always see to it we get into the college we want or that we are offered the job we hope for. And yes, God does not always let us stay in our own homes until we draw our last breath despite our cries to the Almighty that we never need assisted living or nursing care.

There are times when we experience the deafening sound of silence from God, and I have come to believe sometimes when this happens, it’s not that God is not responding, it’s that we aren’t open to God’s response leading us in a different direction than we think or hope or believe is God’s direction.

Although not the case with the Canaanite woman, sometimes our own wants, past experiences, prejudices, and assumptions, can act as ear plugs which keep us from hearing or experiencing God’s guidance and answers. But there are times I think when, like it was for the Canaanite woman, it may simply be impossible to know why it is we are experiencing the deafening sound of silence when we approach God. We are after all humans and not God.

As we kneel alongside the Canaanite woman asking God to fill our need, I think she invites us to hear the faithful sound of her voice reminding us that through it all, God is merciful; that all times and in all places God is good; that we are never far from the power of God’s love even in our deepest distress.

When we are so fortunate as to hear the blessed sound of silence, I think we should give thanks for it. But when we encounter the deafening sound of silence, be it from the surgeon in the operating room with a loved one, or
the teenager still out long past curfew, or even from God, the Canaanite woman’s voice calls out to us, reminding us that God’s love still surrounds us, that God’s care still enfolds us, and that God’s heart is still open to us. There is, you see, no boundary that God is not willing to cross to bring us safely home. And that, my friends, is indeed a promise we can stand on from this time forward and forevermore.

NOTES

1. Gary Charles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year 1, Volume 3