

## **SESSION THREE**

### **Silence Kills**

**Prayer:** *Lord, with a powerful voice you created a world from the silence of nothingness. You spoke and your word brought forth being, life. You called humans for a particular relationship, sharing your very image in your gift of words, speech. Teach us to find life in your written word and in your Word Incarnate and to respond with honest words of faith to your presence. ... Amen.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 32. Seven prayers known as the "penitential psalms" offer a repertory of pleas for God's mercy and to turn away wrath from sinners who are confessing their weak, broken, rebellious state in disobedience to God. Martin Luther found grace in the ability of these psalms to move the one who prays from guilty alienation from God and humans to joyous relief in reconciliation. Of those seven psalms, Psalm 32 stands alone with its opening "spoiler alert!" It begins with the end of the story: "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." Certainly it follows with heavy matters that are wrecking the psalmist's life. But this prayer offers up its bitter meal serving dessert first!

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning ... my strength was dried up ...  
Then I acknowledged my sin and did not hide ...  
I said, "I will confess ...  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin." (Psalm 32:3-5)*

Here Walter Brueggemann begins to dig into the heart of the oppressive silence by which we humans stifle ourselves; he sharpens his pen on our unwillingness to speak honestly about our sins, noting how even our bodies respond. While our minds are busy deflecting guilt (from "we are only human" to "the woman you gave me made me do it"), our bodies ache with the weight of hiding from truth. They groan without our intent and beyond our willing.

We may recall the Apostle Paul's words: "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The sense here is that we do not live out, or out of, the glory of God's image in us. But worse, we refuse to say so! We attempt to escape our sin by hiding; trying to cover it in the darkness of silence. Denial and excuse, the very defenses we use to protect us from God's judgment, only serve to further alienate us from the only One who can cover our sin and who longs not only to forgive our sin but also to relieve our guilt.

Brueggemann writes, "God would not, or could not, [relieve us while our] denial persisted." (41) Perhaps this is hyperbole – a step too far. Forgiveness itself is accomplished by Christ, "once and for all" on the cross (e.g. Romans 6:10; Hebrews 10; 1 Peter 3:18) That case is closed, with nothing more to be done. Ah, but the

relief, the reconciling, the restoration of relationship is a tango – it takes two. Faith is the *connection* that relieves guilt. When we risk honest speech, disclosing who we are and what we have done to God, whom Brueggemann calls "the Faithful Listener," we find release from the oppressive power of guilt.

### Questions for meditation/response:

1. This chapter in Brueggemann's book seems to have a different perspective on "oppressive silence." What similarities do you see? In what ways do you find the differences in the "need to break silence" between this discussion and the preceding sessions?
2. Brueggemann indicates that the word order in the original Hebrew text of Psalm 32:5 allows a different nuance in translation. He presents: "My sin I have made known; my iniquity I do not cover up." What might be the reconciling and community-building impact of revealing our sins to each other rather than simply acknowledging that we sin?
3. The psalmist declares that it was only after he confessed his sin(s) that God forgave him. How do you experience God's forgiveness? Do you notice a difference between *knowing* that you are forgiven and *experiencing* forgiveness?
4. What is the role of "breaking silence" in your relationship with the triune God?

For reference to what the church teaches, see The Book of Confessions. All of the confessional statements except 1 and 10 have articles addressing forgiveness (3, The Scots confession uses the term "remission of sin"). It might be an intriguing "rabbit trail" adventure to discover why the Nicene Creed and the Belhar Confession do not address forgiveness/remission.

(Please share your thoughts in response to one of the four questions above by a "reply to all" email. Include the question in your response.)

NOTE: If you requested not to be included in the "group" discussion, your reply will go only to the originator of the email you received for this devotional/study. If you choose not to reply, it is just between you and the Lord.)

Prayer: *Lord of voice and silence, God who speaks and listens, hear now our prayer. You are the God who knows and cares for us in our clamoring response or our devastating failure even to acknowledge your word to us. By your Holy Spirit grant me wisdom and courage to break my silence with you; make me confident that my confession is received in love beyond what I hope or even imagine and assured that, through the communion of the body of Christ, my openness will enable me to receive your forgiveness and be reconciled with you and my neighbor. ... Amen!*