

**Bearing Witness**  
Silence please – OR NOT!  
By: Barbara Buzzard

I had the opportunity just recently to study a child who I guessed to be around three-ish and what caused me to pay attention to him was that even in the midst of an outdoor pool event, he made no sounds at all. On the second occasion it was the same; he was an active participant in the fun, although silent throughout. I have no idea why this darling boy did not speak. If I could have – I would have *willed* him to speak.

I began to wonder if perhaps that is how God sees us. Does a similar situation exist between us as God's children and our Father? Is He *willing* us to speak when we are silent? Perhaps He agonizes over us as we fail to speak on His behalf, as we fail to relay to others that He has a Plan and that they could have a part in it.

I am reminded of a similar situation years ago when I was alerted to the fact that the children we had invited to play badminton were playing silently. When our family played we played raucously with whoops and shouting. In this case an abusive father had shaped these children into wooden figures who were silent so as not to disturb him.

Silence is unnatural. It is often a warning sign that all is not right. Aren't we all relieved when after a moment of silence honoring the memory of someone, we are free to speak again? Imagine if that freedom was never restored! And now when our freedom of speech is being curtailed for political reasons, this right becomes all the more valuable. Our obligations in this age of corruption and lostness are surely even greater.

Who or what has silenced us as Christians? We are meant to proclaim, to testify to, to speak about the Scriptures with enthusiasm, to relate to others our discovery of what it means to be saved and what we are saved **for**? And how awesome the two passions of Jesus are: his teachings and his sacrifice. The two greatest fears shared by Americans are said to be: 1) fear of public speaking, and 2) fear of snakes. Since I suffer from both of these, you simply couldn't outdo me here. Although speaking of one's faith is not exactly public speaking I believe that the fear factor is in operation here. We must not allow it to rule the day!

I love the fact that whenever angels appeared to men or women in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, they always said, "Don't be afraid."<sup>1</sup> Since fear will cause us to disobey our "marching orders" we need to address it and overcome it. We dare not risk God's disappointment. His approval of our actions (our words in action) is essential for entrance into the Kingdom. We must grow in favor with God as did Jesus<sup>2</sup> by his obedience. There is no sitting still, no resting on our laurels, no hiding, no silence. There is no freedom, male or female to be a coward. It's a freedom we do not have – a dishonest way to go, a form of cheating and at worst betrayal. It seems that much of Christendom comes up short when it comes to voicing our convictions.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Harold Kushner has pointed out the most frequent statement of God to man in the Hebrew Bible is "Do not fear."<sup>4</sup> In fact, some claim it is found 365 times, in various forms: e.g. "Fear not!" "Do not be frightened!" "Be not afraid."<sup>5</sup>

**Steel Magnolia?!<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Or similar words such as "Do not fear." Luke 1:13, 1:30, 2:10, Acts 12:8, 27:4 Rev. 17:7

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:40, 52

<sup>3</sup> *Courage of our Convictions*, Barbara Buzzard

<sup>4</sup> Prager, *The Rational Bible*, Genesis 15:1

<sup>5</sup> Hidalgo, *Changing Faith*. P. 153, 2015

<sup>6</sup> I am not referring to the movie by that name.

Let me first describe for those not fortunate enough to have or even have seen a magnolia tree. It is a staple in southern gardens, having huge white, pink, or yellow fragrant blossoms in early spring. The tree can be massive and can withstand gale force winds. The bloom is said to represent nobility and purity. A steel magnolia is a term given to a woman who exemplifies both traditionally feminine and uncommon fortitude, denoting a southern woman who is strong and independent and yet feminine. She is unflinching in character and is often the backbone of the family. A steel magnolia possesses indefatigable strength, determination and resolve. As one writer put it: the image of a steel magnolia “melds beauty with perseverance, softness with backbone, delicacy with durability, sweetness with stamina.” (Sounds awfully like that Proverbs 31 woman!)<sup>7</sup> This steel magnolia is very powerful but she uses that power judiciously.<sup>8</sup>

One biblical steel magnolia was Joanna who was one of Jesus’ main followers. She was the wife of Chuza, Herod’s financial steward. She was obviously a woman of means. She accompanied Jesus during his ministry for at least two years and financially backed much if not most of the disciples’ cost of living.

I am certainly not the first to credit Mary Magdalene with being a steel magnolia.<sup>9</sup> While not from the south, she was a source of strength throughout Jesus’ ministry. She is mentioned *fourteen times* in the gospels; in eight of these accounts she is named with other women, but she always is first in the list. It is noteworthy as well that she was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection. What an honor!<sup>10</sup> is also noteworthy that she and the other women stood steadfast at the crucifixion (as the men fled) until the very bitter end. She followed Jesus on his last journey to Jerusalem, was there at the trial where he, who was without sin, was pronounced guilty. She must have witnessed Jesus being spat upon and violently beaten, and yet she was still there. She would have seen his dreadful walk to Calvary and the torture of being nailed to the cross. How did she bear this? She would have heard Jesus’ agonizing cries and been heart broken as the spear thrust into his side pronounced him dead. Was Jesus comforted by their presence, by their closeness which displayed their love and loyalty? Her presence throughout this vicious ordeal spoke volumes about her. The anguish of watching Jesus die and the hideous passions of those who mocked him and wanted him dead did not cause her to abandon her watch. She never ran away. She remained steadfast there until the very bitter end. I think her fierce love for Jesus and her courage (and that of the other women) is utterly remarkable, almost unimaginable. She was the last to leave the cross, staying close to Jesus’ body. She allowed nothing to disrupt her witness, her loyalty to Jesus. She watched as Joseph of Arimathea sealed his body in the tomb and surely went away with one of the greatest griefs known to humankind. But then, her world was shaken by our all powerful God and she was allowed to be the first one to witness history’s most important event ever. Not only is Mary the most unlikely of candidates for this honor but her story reveals Jesus’ going against what is expected, working via surprise (as is God’s method as well). The fact that Jesus and his father used one of the most unlikely is in itself a wonderful testament to the fact that if we allow ourselves to be used – God will do totally amazing things.<sup>11</sup>

When Mary realizes it is Jesus who is speaking to her she addresses him as Rabboni which means teacher, and obviously in this case, her *beloved* teacher. (It is interesting that before she recognized who it was who was speaking to her, she addressed the man as ‘Sir,’ “{kurie, lord, a title flexible

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<sup>8</sup> Steel magnolias are credited with the creation and use of “bless their hearts,” a phrase with multiple meanings from the genuine, sympathetic and sincere to a near insult used with condescension and even contempt. It *can* be a way for southern women to excuse themselves for speaking ill of someone. Men are now borrowing this tool as well!

<sup>9</sup> Credit goes to Amy Burton to introduce these facts.

<sup>10</sup> We normally give great honor to ‘first’ things. In this case Jesus’ first appearance was not to one of the twelve, but to Mary.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 7:43

enough to be applied to God and a gardener!"} Mary was then the first commissioned to tell the twelve, and no doubt she told and re-told her teacher and lord's victory over death for the rest of her life. What a witness she had as the most pre-eminent witness to resurrection! She would have spoken with passion about the resurrection of Jesus and the fact that what she experienced – seeing him with her own eyes go from death to resurrected life would be the preview and model for his followers.

### To be examined

This well known quotation from St. Francis :“Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words” is disturbing in a number of ways. This saying has almost taken on a life of its own but it does violence to Jesus’ words. It depicts a theology foreign to the Gospels and certainly foreign to the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus emphasized over and over again the supreme importance first of listening <sup>12</sup> to his *words* and secondly of obeying his *words*. While I understand the dramatic effects a life of service can have, it is limited, limited in not being able to bless others with the critical directions necessary for entrance into the Kingdom..

Why is this so disturbing? Because there is an element of truth in it but we know that one half of a lie is still a lie. It is disturbing because implicit in it is the false assumption that the most powerful sermons would be unspoken. This is backwards thinking. This is to contradict Jesus flatly: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine, and obeys them, is like a wise man who built his house on solid rock...Everyone who hears my word, and does not obey them, is like a moron who built his house on the sand.”<sup>13</sup>

It is disturbing because it is basically saying that proclaiming the Gospel by example is *more virtuous than by voice*.<sup>14</sup>

“It’s important to examine what kind of biblical doctrine that quote is trying to teach us. It’s particularly dangerous primarily because it immediately creates an unnecessary and false dichotomy between gospel demonstration and gospel proclamation. The quote assumes and asserts that living like Jesus supersedes proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. It is as if to say “*Don’t worry about talking about Jesus, just live like Him and everything will take care of itself*”. This is a really popular position in our culture today because most Christians are super sensitive to the potential reality of offending anyone with their Biblical worldview. Therefore, in an attempt to not offend anyone, we adopt a weak missiology that neither Jesus nor the apostles practiced themselves. We must remember that **right thinking** (theology) **leads to right living** (missiology).”<sup>15</sup>

The making of a disciple would and must involve both demonstration and teaching via speech. Acts displays this harmony. Of course we should display qualities which will lead people to believe and to follow Jesus. But never to the exclusion of voicing the story. It is not either/or. It is both/and. Testifying to Jesus’ words and following his lifestyle are both required. They are not at odds with each other. Stephan models this for us in that his acts matched his words, the most passionate and hard-hitting sermon ever.<sup>16</sup> If as a Christian, you have been tempted to believe this unbiblical and damaging assertion that words are not necessary, please be reconciled to the Truth and listen all the more urgently to Jesus’ words and then practice them.

“The majority of Christians, who I know personally, who love this quote are people that are scared of sharing their faith with others and almost never even talk about their faith in general. Is this really what Jesus had in mind for his disciples when He rose from the grave and gave them His great commission? ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)) Live good lives but only talk about it when and if it comes up?! I

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<sup>12</sup> Shemah

<sup>13</sup> Mat. 7:24a, 26

<sup>14</sup> Brett Ricly, *Display the Gospel*, July 10, 2012, emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 7

struggle to see how any person can exegetically come to that conclusion after reading the book of Acts (not to mention any other New Testament letter). The early church community frequented public spaces and went from home to home on a daily basis ([Acts 2:46](#)) sharing the gospel, proclaiming the Kingdom, and teaching about the resurrected Christ as those who were eyewitnesses. Speaking about Jesus and the Kingdom was literally all the disciples did everyday. Granted, they were loving people, serving people, selling possessions, etc. but **those acts of love and compassion were never divorced from faithful gospel proclamation.**<sup>17</sup>

**“The most concerning part of this quote are the words ‘if necessary.’** If necessary? Think about what those two words mean. The logical assumption here must be that Christians can and should live like Jesus without ever talking about Jesus or the gospel. It also includes the faulty assumption that talking about Jesus or the gospel should be our last resort. Really?! Is that the impression you get from the book of Acts? They only talked about Jesus as a last resort in leading people to Him? Not a chance. Jesus was the first thing on their minds, hearts, and lips.<sup>18</sup>

“In no other facet of life and culture do we assume that if someone just watches our behavior that they will then automatically come to an understanding of what we're doing. We don't go to school and just watch the teachers color, draw, or write. They teach. They speak instructions, explain concepts, and guide us as we learn all while modeling the proper way to complete the assignment. The natural way we learn almost everything includes cognitive knowledge and putting that knowledge into practice somehow.”<sup>19</sup>

“How then will people call on him whom they have not believed? How will they believe him whom they have not heard preaching the Gospel? And how will they hear without someone preaching it to them?...We see then that belief is based on hearing – hearing the Gospel Message preached by the Messiah,<sup>20</sup> As we are told to “Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation,”<sup>21</sup> we are, in fact, commissioned<sup>22</sup> by Jesus to do what he did. Our society is in a desperate state of lostness, experiencing a void which only the Truth of Jesus’ and his father’s words can fill. May we be present in that adventure (and be wise!) as we obey those life-giving words and thereby take the blessing which we have received to others.

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<sup>17</sup> Brett Ricly, emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Rom. 10:14, 17

<sup>21</sup> Mark 16:15

<sup>22</sup> Mat. 7:21