

WHAT DO YOU USE YOUR VOICE for?

Tonight I invite you to reflect on your own voice. When do you speak up? When to you choose to remain silent? What does your voice reflect about you?

We've all heard sayings about VOICE . . . what do they mean for you?

I speak not for myself but for those without voice . . .

Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes.

Stay strong. Stand up. Have a voice.

You don't have to have a grand platform or idea to make your words matter, to make your voice heard.

When I told my daughter I was assigned the reflection, she responded, "Oh, I thought that was so cool when my Grandma would go up to read in church!" (Well, I've never been a speaker at church . . . except maybe when I get the responsiveness messed up, and I'm the only one speaking – but that's definitely NOT cool!) My mother on the other hand, was a regular –she very frequently did the readings. AND she often stood up at announcements since she ran the search committee, and the community food drive, and so on. Definitely a very familiar voice for her congregation.

And outside of church she volunteered in multiple organizations. One in particular that I'll mention is the local Blind Association where she would volunteer to read the local news on a radio station for the visually impaired. The newspaper and coffee every morning was a ritual for her, and she chose to share that simple pleasure with those who could no longer see to read. Again, definitely a very familiar voice over the radio waves to SO many people.

As most of you know, one day my Mother permanently lost her voice. It was a few days after my father's funeral, she had a massive stroke that affected the left side of her brain and caused physical and cognitive handicaps. Devastating, yes, but the most profound – and what complicates everything else - has been the loss of her voice. It has impacted our lives in ways I never could have imagined.

What does it mean to lose your voice? Don't we all lose our voice at different times in our life? Maybe a physical illness, like laryngitis. Or maybe an emotion that left us speechless – shock, dismay, anger, surprise. How did it make you feel when it happened? A temporary feeling of helplessness? A loss of control? Frustration? Vulnerable? What is it about our voice that makes us feel stronger, makes us whole?

What about the situations that we CHOOSE silence? Are there times when you could have said something, but didn't? Things you wished you said but never got a second chance? Regrets from not making your opinion known? Did you ever have your silence be confused with consent? Or conversely, did something come out of your mouth that you wished you never said? The dreaded, "can't take it back, now." feeling? Yes, we all have choices for when to speak up and when not to – and like any other choice, sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don't.

Are there situations that impacted you without being asked – where you had no say? You didn't get a chance to be voice at the table. Did it make you feel vulnerable? Victimized? Something Mark said prior to a Midnight Run has always resonated with me about homeless people: they feel loneliness that comes from no longer having conversations with people. Homeless people certainly have able vocal chords! How could your voice be related to your house?! Or perhaps, our voice is so much more . . . a means of expressing who we are at any given place and time.

Isn't it funny how Apple decided to give the iphone a Siri VOICE? Why? How did that affect our relationship with our phones?!!! Think about relationships we have without words. . . . like our pets. We all love our pets! They're often referred to as "man's best friend" – yet they have NO voice! Or is that why they are our best friend? To simply BE with us, and never offer criticism, judgment, unwanted advice. To show love and affection with actions only, never with words. What about your relationship with GOD . . . do you hear the voice of GOD? How are your prayers answered without words? How differently do you feel when you know there won't be a verbal response?

What about your inner voice? Do you hear a parent or loved one in certain situations that stays with you, your entire life? (I still laugh when my grandmother's expression "Good gravy!!!" pops into my head!) Or do you hear yourself say something and realize, "I'm turning into ____ so&so!" Do you hang onto past grudges with hurtful words that seem branded into your brain? Do you have any phrases that resonate with you – comfort or encouraging words that were offered at a time when you needed to hear it the most?

More importantly, who hears YOUR voice in their head? What do they hear? Or what do you WANT them to hear? What is it about YOUR voice that resonates with others – is it praise? Criticism? Sarcasm? Encouragement? Affection? How do you most often use your own voice? Is it to make yourself heard? Is it to understand others, to ask clarifying questions? To comfort those around you? How does it reflect who you are at any given stage in your life?

As Debra often reminds us . . . “Life is short. And we do not have much time. To gladden the hearts of those who travel with us . . .” In YOUR limited time, what words will you choose?

What will you say?