

Being Shushed

Few things are as irritating as being “shushed.” I still recall childhood memories of fingers pressed against lips as the sibilant hissing struck a chord of irritation within me. Shushing is abrupt; it cuts and makes the voice mute. To those to whom it is directed, the shush shuns, and we, perhaps, rightfully rebel against this type of quieting. Something deeper within us affirms our speech and expression as vital for our thriving.

Holy Noticing

Admittedly, the ruckus of my childhood called for times of silencing. Silence engenders a type of attentiveness that lends itself to holy noticing. The quietness of tears, the softness of a sanctuary, the mother’s whisper and finger not pressing against mouth but pointing to something worth seeing. Unlike shushing, which tends to sever connection, the holy hush keeps us from speaking for a time. Hopefully, our communication will be full and truthful when we finally speak.

Shushing vs. Hushing

Theologically, the difference between shushing and hushing comes down to Christian testimony. Shushing denies the dignity of human speech. It prevents testimony. At its most extreme, our shushing expresses a human tendency to censor viewpoints we disagree with. It also expresses our tendency to eliminate those we deem dangerous from dialogue. Shushing seeks to remove a voice from the conversation. As a result, the possibility of testimonies of changed perspective and reconciliation are also eliminated.



On the other hand, hushing denies speech for a time, but with the intended aim of eventually allowing a testimony. It’s a temporary pause that aids speech. See the difference? Hushing is formative, quieting the tongue so that it might be quickened to a more faithful conversation and expression of our relationship to neighbor and God. As we leave the season of Advent, we might recall the hushing of Zechariah. After denying the pregnancy with John the Baptist, he would eventually speak a truthful testimony about God’s work in his life.

Reading the Apostle Paul’s letters reminds me of the importance of testimony, especially for those impacted by our criminal justice system. Paul found himself imprisoned, yet how important was it to testify about the hope he experienced while shackled?

The Possibility for Testimony

At the very least, this Pauline reflection leads me to think Christians should be concerned about the status and quality of communication made available to those already muffled by the criminal justice system. At the very least, Christians should raise their brows to inordinate revenues generated by prison communication programs. Not to mention subsequent fees charged to prisoners. At the very least, Christians should keep vigilant to any deprivation of liberty imposed upon those impacted by the criminal justice system. At the very least, Christians should question the very notion of a death penalty—state-sanctioned violence not unlike what our Lord encountered firsthand. This violence

eradicates the possibility of reconciliation and testimony as voices are permanently hushed upon death row.

The human tendency to enact violence that doesn't allow for reconciliation is odd behavior for the Christian. God is not bound to our human constructions of justice. God frequently spoke to and spoke from the mouths of those shunned and shushed. That's why at ECF, we support ministries like [New Hope House](#) to close the gap of geographical isolation between death-row inmates and their loved ones. We support the ability to restore the opportunity for dignified speech and the possibility of testimony. This work is essential, not only for the healing of those incarcerated and their families. But it is essential for the healing and witness that comes to a nation when it faces the inhumane contexts generated by its shushing.



The Rev. Trey B. Phillips (he/him) is a past member of the ECF Board of Directors and is the curate and Director of Youth Ministries at St. Catherine's Episcopal Church (Marietta). There his work focuses upon the Christian formation of the youth and wider parish. Trey's passion is to reinvigorate the local parish as a center for deep theological learning by employing the rich intersection of human learning sciences and religious education.

SUPPORT ECF

Your one-time or monthly donation allows us to serve people experiencing poverty and oppression throughout our Diocese. [Make a donation at https://episcopalcommunityfoundation.org/donate/](https://episcopalcommunityfoundation.org/donate/)