Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 6, Special Issue 2 (2017): 138-157

Blessed Silence: Explorations in Christian Contemplation and Hearing Loss

Jana Bennett

A BROAD RANGE OF SCHOLARS REPRESENTING fields from philosophy to education to technology, each of whom writes about deafness, recently published an important collection of essays, which they called *Deaf Gain*.[1] "Deaf Gain" is a term that comes from sign language, but it is also meant to stand in stark and direct contrast to "hearing loss." Rather than seeing deafness as a loss, the scholars work to understand deafness as a gain for both the individual and society. The book's central premise is that people need to reconceive deafness and see it not as a loss but as something that adds to the diversity of human life.

Seeing deafness as a gain argues against the often-maligned "medical model" of disability that has been strongly operational for human beings since at least the nineteenth century. The medical model assumed a standard of normalcy against which all people were to be measured. On this view, those with disabilities needed to be "fixed" especially by medical and technological means. A medical model of disability is further supported by theological ideas of disability that were then, and sometimes remain today, related to sinfulness. Deaf Gain, on the other hand, operates within a "social model" of disability, a model that sees society as either diminishing or enhancing human life, including the lives of people with disabilities, depending on the ways society forms such diverse things as its architecture (as in ramps for wheelchairs and loops for the deaf), legal protections of people with disabilities, and the language used to speak about disabilities.

The "Deaf Gain" collection did not include a theologian's voice, but the concept is intriguing for theology. Seeing deafness as a gain runs counter to some dominant theological understandings in Christianity about the Word, and Jesus as the Incarnate Word of God, needing to be heard. As Thomas Oden notes, citing the ninth century theologian Prudentius, "Speaking and hearing are crucial to the Gospel, which is news to be spoken and heard. This is why Jesus opens

[1] H-Dirksen L Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, eds. *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

ears and loosens tongues."[2] Prudentius's words about the deaf suggest negativity: "Deafened ears, of sound unconscious / Every passage blocked and closed, / At the word of Christ responding, / All the portals open wide, / Hear with joy friendly voices and / The softly whispered speech."[3] The Word, spoken and proclaimed, is a strong image – even a dominant image – in much of Christian thought. Jesus the Word himself becomes a stumbling block for those who cannot hear. Further, the emphasis in Jesus's miracles on healing people with disabilities, including deafness, can suggest that hearing loss is meant not to exist in God's good world.

The dominant and largely negative image of the Word, Christ, juxtaposed with the concept of Deaf Gain, invites theological consideration of deafness. This essay seeks to extend the discussion of Deaf Gain conversation occurring in secular disability studies by thinking about the possibilities of Deaf Gain as theological and as a good contribution to disability ethics conversations. I focus on the Christian practice of silent contemplation as one possible contribution for Deaf Gain. I argue that silent contemplation as a means of "Deaf Gain" is a helpful way for theologians and others working in disability studies to rethink hearing loss and theology of disability, as well as a crucial aspect of doing moral theology well. Yet, "Deaf Gain" can also seem boundary-less. In its search to show that deafness is beneficial to humanity in a range of ways, Deaf Gain ignores boundaries, especially the boundaries of physical bodies. That is, deafness is not a free-standing, infinite gain but one that must be embodied and therefore come with limits. Accordingly, while most of my argument articulates the importance of physical silence – both deaf and non-deaf – for rightly understanding moral thought and disability – my argument concludes that what we learn from silence and contemplation is not only an appreciation of deafness but also an appreciation for the limits of our bodies and our senses, deaf or not.

I make my argument first by naming how deafness has been principally understood as a loss, rather than a gain, in both theological and non-theological accounts of deafness, especially because of the silence that hearing loss induces. In this part, I raise some of the theological and ethical problems that arise with the propensity to see deafness as a loss, especially in relation to a medical model of disability. Then I turn to thinking about silence as a means of Deaf Gain, by discussing the silence of contemplation. Deaf Gain participates in a social model of disability, a model that shows that it is society that fosters disabling conditions. I show how silent contemplation can mirror the experiences of hearing loss, and how silent contemplation forms a necessary, if little recognized, aspect of

[2] Thomas C. Oden, *The Good Works Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 170.
[3] Oden, *The Good Works Reader*, 170.

Christian moral life. This means that deafness can and should be recognized more fully for its contributions in Christian life, which is precisely the kind of work that that authors of *Deaf Gain* hope to foster. However, at the conclusion of the essay, I offer a theological critique of Deaf Gain, via my focus on contemplation. I suggest that Deaf Gain must be tempered by knowledge and even embrace of embodiment and bodily disabilities, precisely so that the Holy Spirit can enter into our lives.

It is standard in discussions of deafness to clarify the term. In this essay, I use "deafness" to refer to all people who have hearing impairment, including but not limited to people who use sign language or are part of the Deaf Culture linguistic group. "Deaf" with an uppercase D refers to the Deaf community of people who sign and who form unique languages, not unlike English or French, and a set of language-related customs. "Hard-of-hearing" and hearing impairment also appear occasionally in this essay. Both terms refer generally and broadly to people with hearing loss in the ways that a (hearing) medical community might typically understand.

"HEARING LOSS FAILS TO SILENCE…"[4]

Hearing loss, as the phrase suggests, is most often seen as a loss rather than a gain. It is perceived as a *problem* largely because of its silence. Hearing loss is counted as a social disability because a deaf person's silent world can limit or prohibit participation in social conversations and activities. Marriages where one person has a hearing loss and the other does not have higher rates of divorce than in the general population, due to the fact that at least one member of the couple does not feel heard. People with hearing loss lose participation in social events because they are often unable to hear in noisy restaurants, parties, or even relatively small gatherings of people. The collegial lunch, the after-work cocktail hour, and the large meeting conference room can each be isolating for people with hearing loss, and can affect a person's career trajectory and working relationships. Similarly, the dinner party (even a small one), the music in the background at a coffee shop where one has gathered with friends, and attendance at a play, concert, or movie theater all can be simply uncomfortable to nearly impossible with hearing loss. It should

[4] The pun is a common one in use in contemporary headlines for stories featuring athletes, musicians, dancers, and scholars who are hearing impaired. See, for example, Amy Scribner, "Hearing Loss Fails to Silence Allison Biggs' Talents," *The Spokesman Review*, May 27, 1999; Marc Shugold, "Beyond Silence: Profound Hearing Loss No Hindrance to Lass Who Lives by Rhythm," *Rocky Mountain News*, November 13 2002; Robert Croan, "Musician Hasn't Allowed Hearing Loss to Silence Her," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 3, 1997; Blake Sebring, "Hearing Loss Can't Silence These Skills: Grant Isenbarger, 11, Hasn't Let Disability Keep Him Off the Hockey Rink," *The News Sentinel* (Fort Wayne, IN), February 16, 2005.

be no surprise, then, that at least one study has identified a correlation between degrees of loneliness and having hearing loss.[5]

Narrating his experience of deafness, computer programmer David Peter writes, "Deafness means I don't understand anyone. When someone talks at lunch, I want to know what they say. I miss out on the daily conversation, the back-and-forth, the friendships made after propinquity. And the worst part is that I don't have a choice in the matter."[6] His sense of social isolation is palpable. Peter goes on to describe the difficulty with being in an open office, where people casually share programming tips but where he misses every tip, off topic conversations that make for a friendly work environment, and even the stuff of meetings. While his workplace is helpful in hiring transcribers, it is difficult to overemphasize how much a deaf person might miss in daily interactions.

Medical reviews of deafness speak of fixing a world of silence via various forms of hearing aids and cochlear implants. The aim of these technologies is to bring sound into the life of a hearing impaired person. This is a laudable quest, especially given the forms of silence and isolation described above. Such technologies can backfire, however. "Fixing" a hearing loss with hearing aids or cochlear implants does not restore hearing to the level of a "normal" person, in the way that glasses, contact lenses, and LASIK surgery restore eyesight for many people who had been "sighted" before. Even a "normal" person who grew up without hearing loss during childhood, who loses hearing as an adult, and receives a cochlear implant in their 50s, will not experience their pre-loss hearing restored. The sounds will be different with these devices and implant recipients have to undergo training in order to identify sounds they hear with the implant.

A similar process can take place every time a hearing aid user switches to new hearing aids. In addition, feedback from hearing aids can prevent hearing, and the sounds via hearing aids can be so strange that a user gives up on hearing with them. Hearing aids and implants cannot always diminish background noise and may amplify exactly the wrong sounds for a given situation. Having hearing aids does not mean that every sound will be heard or that a person with hearing loss will stop saying "What?" or "Pardon me?" Fixing a hearing loss with medical devices therefore offers only a partial gift, a chance to participate a little more often in the particular social world of the hearing. (Such a view of fixing hearing loss tends to omit the fact that Deaf culture is also a very social world, but in a different language.)

---

[5] Ellen Christian, et al, "Sounds of Silence: Coping with Hearing Loss and Loneliness," *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 15, no. 11 (1989): 4.

[6] David Peter, "Being Deaf: How Different the World Is Without Hearing," *Gizmodo*, gizmodo.com/5912623/being-deaf.

The desire to fix hearing loss, to overcome its silence and its results, plays strongly in contemporary media. Overcoming the silence of hearing loss features in numerous articles focusing on deaf athletes, musicians, and others. One article touts that a hockey player does not let silence prevent him from playing hockey—"Hearing loss can't silence these skills"—despite that skill in skating wouldn't seem to have much to do with whether a person hears. (Hearing loss will probably affect a person's ability to play in a game, however.)[7]

Theologically, the silence associated with hearing loss is a problem as well. Scripture proclaims, again and again, that in God's reign, the deaf shall hear! "On that day, the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll" (Isaiah 29:17-24). Deafness gets counted as one among many impoverished conditions that God will overturn: blindness, lowliness, lameness. Hearing loss is a definite loss in scripture. God is often portrayed as a God who hears, the God of the hearing. For example, theologian Wayne Morris exegetes Exodus 3:1-6, the story of Moses and the burning bush, by describing how impossible it would be for a deaf person to hear the voice of God from the bush and to cover their eyes (since eyes are one of the main ways that deaf people interpret the world around them). [8] If a deaf person could not communicate with God in this story, nor imagine what it would be like to be present in the story, it seems evident that God is a God of the hearing.

This is not the only story about deafness. God is also named as a champion and protector of people with deafness. In Exodus 4:11, in response to Moses' complaint that he does not speak well, God fires back, "Who gives one person speech? Who makes another mute or deaf...? Is it not I, the Lord?" God is the one who gives these characteristics. God can use them in whatever way God chooses, including by choosing Moses to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. When God gives the law, part of what is included is injunctions against "insult[ing] the deaf" (Leviticus 19:14).

Yet, the more dominant images of deafness are ones that depict God as not hearing the cries of the people or that, out of frustration and need, implore God to hear: "To you, Lord, I call; my Rock, do not be deaf to me" (Psalm 28:1).[9] Deafness and the silence that come with it are experienced not as good, but as negatives, as indications that God simply is not present (or more problematically, ignoring requests). Deafness therefore implies the absence of God. Thus, Micah proclaims confidently, "I will wait for God my savior; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:7). If there is silence, it cannot be that there is any

[7] See above, footnote four for these references.
[8] Wayne Morris, *Theology Without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 96-7.
[9] See also Psalm 39:13 and Psalm 83:2.

real deafness present but only because we must wait for God to speak so that we may hear.

It follows, then, that the God of the hearing must require the deaf to become hearing. Prophetic scriptures speak about the good things God will do, which often recount how God will make the deaf hear. In Isaiah 35, for example, the prophet enumerates all the ways Israel will be redeemed from her time in captivity. Redemption includes: "Then the eyes of the blind shall see, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened" (Isaiah 35:5). Other scriptures have this focus on redemption via hearing: "On that day, the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll" (Isaiah 29:18).

Perhaps because of the way hearing is associated with the jubilee, deafness becomes a shorthand way to describe all that has gone wrong in peoples' relationship with God. For example, the prophet Micah says that when God comes to save the people, "The nations will see and will be put to shame, in spite of all their strength; They will put their hands over their mouths; their ears will become deaf…." (Micah 7:16). Deafness becomes a way to speak about Israel's refusal to listen to God. In Isaiah 42:18-20, the prophet admonishes the deaf to hear and the blind to look and see, but then says, "You see many things but do not observe; ears open but do not hear." Deafness (and blindness) are characteristics of the people who have turned away from God, who do not take heed of God's call to the people to live in better ways.

Deafness takes on a still different meaning with Christ's coming. Deafness is healed, and because deafness is healed, people see that Jesus really is Good News. So, in Matthew 11, Jesus can proclaim that the day of salvation has come in him, because the deaf shall hear (and the blind see, the lame walk, etc.). Even more, the good news is proclaimed by showing that the deaf can hear. As Morris suggests, "The recovery of hearing for Deaf people is seen as a sign of the Kingdom of God."[10] In Mark 7, Jesus heals a deaf man, and the people are astonished and say in response that Jesus "has done all things well" (Mark 7:37). Doing all things well means, of course, fulfilling the prophecies that have been told: whoever the Messiah is, the Messiah will be recognized as someone who causes the deaf to hear.

In Morris' hearing and the Protestant church world, a pastor might ask from the pulpit: "Can I have a word from the Lord?" The phrase suggests that God and God's Word are depicted as voices people can hear. An equivalent in Roman Catholic or similar liturgies might be the proclamation lectors say at the conclusion of the lectionary readings: "The Word of the Lord." While in the hearing world, it is understood that hearing God's voice is metaphorical for most,[11] Morris also helps theologians understand that in deaf context, deaf

[10] Morris, *Theology Without Words*, 99.

[11] With the exception of rare locutions, such as the one that Mother Teresa heard.

people wouldn't see these kinds of phrases as metaphorical. Morris recounts deaf people asking him, "What does God's voice sound like?" Clearly, as the tradition has it, God is most definitely a God of the hearing, someone who speaks to those "who have ears to hear."

Given this scriptural witness, it is no surprise that many Christian theological strands emphasize the need for hearing to be sound or restored when lost. In some strands of theology about disability, hearing loss along with other impairments is seen as a sign of sin. The sign of taking away the sin is therefore that the person is healed.[12] Hearing loss is also often treated with pity, as something that Christians need to respond to or provide for. Such a view always makes people with hearing loss objects rather than persons and does not recognize deaf peoples' contributions to church or society.

Liturgical practice similarly reflects the needs and experiences of the hearing and thereby also marginalizes those with hearing loss. Songs sung slowly and closed eyes during prayer make worship isolating for those who cannot hear. "The Word of the Lord" and "Lord, hear our prayer" are two common liturgical statements in many denominations' worship services that presume hearing. Further, in practice, Christians have sometimes been disturbed by the silence occasioned in deafness. In Roman Catholic practice, deaf people frequently were not permitted to receive communion or to enter into marriage contracts because they could not verbally express understanding of what was happening at the Eucharist nor verbally express consent for marriage. This denial was despite clear legal allowances for the deaf to receive the sacraments.[13] In a context where deafness is so much maligned, it makes sense that the church's emphasis would be on healing and restoration – on making deaf people hear just like the hearing so that they, too, can participate in the church and be one of God's people.

Of course, the fixes that a medical model offers and a hearing society extols have been the subjects of debate among those who are deaf. Cochlear implants have become a political issue, a much-publicized debate, and a clash about whether the implants destroy Deaf community. In correcting deafness via cochlear implants, the Deaf community loses a person that might learn its unique language and customs. That is, while it is the case that hearing loss affects a person's ability to participate in a hearing community and its social nature, deafness may be an entrée into deaf communities and a distinctive way of being social. Deaf culture features a language and a

---

[12] See Morris, *Theology without Words*, chapter 5 ("Anyone who has ears, let them hear… But what about Deaf people?").

[13] The First Council of Orange in 441 makes mention of receiving communion. Canons 1101 and 1104 discuss marriage. See Marcel Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture," *Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2005): 307.

particular way of life. When cochlear implants first arose on the scene, that culture seemed at risk of extinction.[14] A similar critique can be made of the hearing church that so focuses on hearing that people often do not see that deafness might in fact be a valuable part of the Body of Christ. Deaf culture as well as contributions of the deaf more generally are vibrant and vital aspects of the church. It is to that question I now turn, with a particular look at the experience of silence as a contribution that deaf people make to the church.

DELIBERATE SILENCE

In contrast to the medical model of disability, a Deaf Gain view articulates a social model of disability, a model that sees society as the major factor limiting full participation of people who have abilities that differ from the so-called norm. One of these norms is that silence is odd, as evidenced in the above section. In this section, however, I discuss ways that silence – including the silence of deaf people – should not be odd, especially in relation to Christian tradition.

For many Christians, silence seems a small way to encounter God. The vow of silence taken by some monastic groups, such as Cistercians and Carthusians, is by turns awe inspiring, compelling, or perplexing (and even repellent). It is precisely because humans often reject silence that it becomes an important way to encounter God. In scriptures, God and God's love so often becomes revealed through the small and the rejected: the mustard seed, the sparrow, the widow's mite. Silence offers another small, forgotten, even rejected state of being for many, a state which actually sows spiritual benefits. This Christian tradition offers a different view of hearing loss and its accompanying silence, a view that does not reject silence but embraces it. The potential parallels between hearing loss and silence are important because, while hearing loss is seen as detrimental to human flourishing, contemplative silence is often seen as *necessary* for human flourishing.

Deaf people often seek out and crave silence. Christina Hartmann writes:

> Silence is far more peaceful and soothing for me. There's a part of me that has to brace itself every morning when I turn on the CI [cochlear implant] and face the barrage of noise of the world around me. Most of these noises aren't pleasant: dogs barking, car starting, amidst the

[14] Much of the debate about cochlear implants occurred in the late 90s and early 2000s. See, for example, Bonnie Poitras Tucker, "Deaf Culture, Cochlear Implants, and Elective Disability," *Hastings Center Report* 28, no. 4 (1998) 6-14. That said, the issue is often still mentioned in contemporary writing, even if cochlear implants themselves are not the main subject of an article or book.

> tumultuous world, it's nice to know that I can carve out some tranquility.[15]

Sara Novic observes similarly, "I like being deaf. I love the feeling of quiet and comfort I have even while living amid the noise and crowds of New York City."[16] Hartmann and Novic use words like "tranquility," "quiet," and "comfort" to describe the presence of silence. These words provide contrasts to the world of noise each experiences when hearing.

The well-known author and practitioner of contemplative prayer Martin Laird describes the importance of physical silence for contemplative prayer. He says,

> Without doubt, regular periods of physical silence play a crucial role in the spiritual life. It must be cultivated and reverenced. We don't make retreats alongside highways. Places of retreat, centers of recovery and healing, even some religious communities purposely cultivate physical silence in service of something else. Stretches of physical silence and contemplation, especially on a daily basis, help destress the nervous system.[17]

Silence is physically and physiologically necessary for Christians. We cultivate silent spaces on purpose. We note how silence helps our bodies, and the construction of special spaces for silence aids in Christians' desires to remain undistracted by both outer and inner noises.

The contrast of welcoming this form of physically constructed silence but condemning the silence of the deaf is striking. Silence of the deaf is physical too. Just as people construct cathedrals, monasteries, and places of retreat with silence in mind, so deafness constructs a physical space and reality in which being silent is one probable default mode of encountering the world.[18] While the hearing cannot quite construct their bodies to experience and encounter silence in this way, perhaps the hearing can learn about the benefits of silence from those who are deaf. Learning about silence's benefits might be especially important in a technocratic culture like ours, where noise and distractions are default experiences for hearing and deaf people alike.

---

[15] Christina Hartmann, "What is it like to be deaf from birth?" *Quora*, www.quora.com/What-is-it-like-to-be-deaf-from-birth.

[16] Sara Novic, "I'm Deaf and I'm Totally Cool With It, Thanks," *XO Jane*, www.xojane.com/issues/im-deaf-and-i-like-it.

[17] Michael Laird, OSA, *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.

[18] It is worth noting, however, that often deaf peoples' encounter with physical deafness is filled with the particular noise of tinnitus – clicking, buzzing, static noises that can likewise be distracting.

The irony that the silence of deafness is not celebrated goes deeper, however. Silence is not merely an important aspect of Christian spaces. It is not merely integral to the Christian act of contemplation that Laird and others argue ought to take place each day. Silence is also integral to developing a whole relationship with God. Scripture, in fact, sometimes witnesses to the importance of silence.[19] Silence brings peace and salvation, as Psalm 109 instructs:

> In their distress they cried to the LORD,
> who brought them out of their peril;
> He hushed the storm to silence,
> the waves of the sea were stilled.
> They rejoiced that the sea grew calm,
> that God brought them to the harbor they longed for.
> (Psalm 107:28-30)

Silence permits a harbor of rest, a sign of rescue from trouble. Still, more often than not, references to silence are negative, however, as in the passages mentioned in the above section. Even passages that might seem favorable to silence and deafness—like the famous one in which Elijah hears God in a whisper (1 Kings 19:11-13)—are not, for deaf people, positive. Whispering is frustrating for deaf people because it is not, properly speaking, silence, and yet it is also not hear-able for those who have some ability to hear.

So, it is interesting that despite scripture's relative silence on silence, numerous holy people in the Christian tradition have declaimed on the benefits of silence. Saint John of the Cross preaches that, "The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must be heard by the soul."[20] Whereas in traditional Christian understanding (both deaf and non-deaf), the Word is a speaking and hearing word, Saint John of the Cross proclaims that the Word is silent, eternally so. If we are to encounter this silent word, we must still use our own bodies to "hear" that silence.

One of the central motivations for silence – both physical and interior – is that it is a way of "praying without words."[21] Praying

---

[19] With emphasis on "sometimes." In scripture, silence is often treated with similar kinds of derision as deafness. God will "silence" enemies.

[20] Saint John of the Cross, *Maxims on Love 21* in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1979), 675. Cited in Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

[21] Justin Langille, "Nothing Between God and You: Awakening to the Wisdom of Contemplative Silence," in *Spirituality, Contemplation, and Transformation: Writings on Centering Prayer*, ed. Thomas Keating and Paul David Lawson (Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2008), 57-80, 68.

without words offers a way to allow nothing, including language, to come between self and God. As contemplative Justin Langille puts it, "Praying without words is not something I do for God; it is rather doing *nothing* in the service of love."[22] Nothing comes between God and me, so *nothing* becomes my prayer. At its best, contemplative prayer enables nothing to stand in the way of God. In silence, I divest all my pride, faults, wrongdoings, but also my goods, my bests, the activities I do well. "To pray without words puts the emphasis on being rather than doing."[23] Silence in this context enables an awareness of the world and one's self that often becomes obscured by the distractions of noise and words.

From that place of silence, we come face to face with God. Thomas Merton, the well-known Cistercian monk who wrote frequently about the benefits of silence, says of God, "It is necessary to name Him Whose silence I share and worship, for in His silence He also speaks my own name."[24] God's speaking of Merton's name in silence is truthful. By contrast, Merton realizes that his own poor attempts to speak result in darkness and death: "My own voice is only able to rouse a dead echo when it calls out to itself. There will never be any awakening in me unless I am called out of darkness by Him Who is my light."[25] The noise of Merton's own voice does not lead to God. It only leads back to himself. Noise from a world that is predominantly a hearing world suffocates because it is merely an echo chamber in which we hear ourselves and others, for the sake of ourselves and others but not for God.

When we are silent, however, Merton suggests that we are able really to "hear" God. "My life is a listening, His is a speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond. For this, my life must be silent. Hence, my silence is my salvation."[26] Merton still uses listening and hearing in ways that Wayne Morris and his Deaf Community Churches might find problematic because they are metaphorical uses of listening and hearing that those with hearing loss may not be able to grasp, precisely because metaphor is part of a particular linguistic community. The Deaf community is its own cultural linguistic community with its own metaphors. Even with that caveat, however, I note the distinction between Merton's metaphorical use of listening and silence compared with the predominant metaphorical uses of listening and hearing in scripture and liturgy. Scripture and Liturgy emphasize the Word as spoken and yet heard only internally in really

[22] Langille, "Nothing Between God and You," 76.
[23] Langille, "Nothing Between God and You," 76.
[24] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1956), 73.
[25] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 73-74.
[26] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 74.

a silent way. Merton, however, names specifically that speaking is a silence that we impose on God. We cannot really hear God without silence. In saying this, Merton is more truthful, at least for those with deafness, than the liturgy is.

Moreover, Merton suggests that silence is the beginning from which words flow. Silence, rather than words, noise, and hearing, is the default way of encountering the world. When we have acknowledged the importance of silence in our lives, then noise, speaking, and human words take their rightful place and do not separate us from God. However, we often fail to recognize this in our constant speaking and desire for noise. As Merton writes,

> Words stand between silence and silence: between the silence of things and the silence of our own being. Between the silence of the world and the silence of God. When we have really met and known the world in silence, words do not separate us from the world nor from other [people], nor from God, nor from ourselves because we no longer trust entirely in language to contain reality. Truth rises from the silence of being to the quiet tremendous presence of the Word.[27]

Being hasty about our words and a constant pressure to generate words and noise actually separate us from God, others, and ourselves, because we trust too much in the production of that noise. The noise of the hearing world becomes an idol that obscures God from us.

Martin Laird helps us understand Merton's point further. Laird remarks that noise constantly makes us aware of external objects, while part of the point of silence and contemplation is to focus on what cannot be objectified, namely God. God "is not an object in the way these things are objects."[28] We learn more about who God is precisely because we stand in silence. Theologically, then, physical silence has the potential to help people acknowledge what Thomas Aquinas and numerous others have acknowledged about God. God is not and cannot be any part of the existing created universe, except, of course, in Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God.[29] Sometimes particular ways of being embodied – such as hearing – can obscure encounters with God because they cause us to look in all the wrong places. It should be said that silence is not the whole of contemplation and that there are different types of silence. Still, physical silence, especially in a culture where physical silence is ever more rare, enables access to other forms of silence.

---

[27] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 86.
[28] Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 45.
[29] Meditating on Thomas Aquinas's *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologica,* especially questions 1-10, aims at this point. Theologian Herbert McCabe, a Blackfriars Thomist, also makes this point over and over again in his book *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 2000).

The idea that silence engenders a deep relationship with God stands in striking contrast to the "God of the hearing" as described in the first part of the essay. When we focused on deafness and its problems as interpreted in the medical model, God was patently a God of the hearing, whose Word remained isolated from those who cannot hear the Word of God. Yet, when the focus shifts to silence, God is no longer isolated from the experience of the deaf – especially in the silence of being deaf.

While the silence of contemplation is a necessary physical aspect of Christians' relationship with God and provides a potentially more truthful account of God's being and activity, Christian tradition has also often connected the silence of contemplation with good moral action. It is contrasted with speech and hearing, as in Isaiah who writes:

> For the fool speaks folly,
> his heart plans evil:
> Godless actions,
> perverse speech against the LORD,
> Letting the hungry go empty
> and the thirsty without drink.
> The deceits of the deceiver are evil,
> he plans devious schemes:
> To ruin the poor with lies,
> and the needy when they plead their case.
> But the noble plan noble deeds,
> and in noble deeds they persist. (Isaiah 32:6-8)

Words become perverse speech able to deceive, and moreover to bring about "devious schemes" that ruin the poor and that perpetuate injustice. Yet, Isaiah continues in verse 14, "the noisy city [will be] deserted," and the people will go to the wilderness, which will become a garden. In that garden, "My people will live in peaceful country, in secure dwellings and quiet resting places" (Isaiah 32:18). Perhaps the noble people who plan noble deeds, then, are the ones who refrain from "perverse speech" by being silent, by acknowledging the peacefulness, quiet, and justice of silent resting spaces.

Silence and the practice of peace and justice thus become interconnected. In his exposition of Psalm 139, Augustine speaks at length about the deceit and injustice of those who speak with "smooth talk" and "malicious hearts."[30] Augustine suggests that the antidote to speaking unjust words, animosity, and hatred is silence. "A talkative

[30] Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 139," in *Exposition of the Psalms*, A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), §5.

man loves lies. What gives him pleasure? Only talking."[31] Augustine therefore counsels,

> Let your enjoyment be in listening to God and your speaking be prompted only by necessity; then you will not be a chatterbox at risk of not being guided aright. Anyway, why do you want to speak and not want to listen? You are always rushing out of doors but are unwilling to return to your own house. Your teacher is within …. It is inside that we listen to truth.[32]

In silence, as Augustine writes, we are guided by truth, in silence we learn from God. Hearing and speaking are, in fact, detrimental to moral activity.

The result of such silence is related to justice. Augustine writes, quoting the psalm, "I know that the Lord will see justice done for the needy." Then he expounds, "This needy person is not talkative, for anyone who is talkative aspires to wealth and is a stranger to hunger."[33] Augustine links talkativeness to selfishness and injustice and admonishes teachers not to speak unless it is truly necessary. He ends his exposition noting that God will be present for the needy, for the ones who see "the face of Christ" because they are pure-hearted and devout, not the ones who have learned to speak deceitful lies.[34] A contemporary deaf pastor puts Augustine's admonitions into the words of contemporary pastoral practice,

> Let me tell you what God has really done for me in my 'defective state.' He has created me with ears that hear what people REALLY say, for in my intensity to hear I listen not just with mechanically assisted hearing. I listen with my whole body. My eyes see the joy, pain and sorrow sometimes hidden in the words as the ears of my heart listen and read the body language of the speaker.[35]

In not rushing to speak, in maintaining silence, this pastor is able to love her neighbor by sharing joys and sorrows.

Moreover, what this deaf pastor describes about listening with her "whole body" can help those with hearing understand the detrimental aspects of multi-tasking. While research on multitasking over the past two decades consistently shows a negative impact, it remains difficult for people to step away from doing many things at once because our

---

[31] Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 139," §15.
[32] Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 139," §16
[33] Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 139," §17.
[34] Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 139," §18.
[35] Elizabeth Von Trapp Walker, "Is Disability A Gift from God?" www.satcom.net/mariposa/gift_or_nov.html. Cited in Broesterhuizen, "Faith in Deaf Culture," 313.

technocratic society so emphasizes multitasking.[36] For a deaf person, listening and writing are not activities that can be done well simultaneously. (This is why deaf people often request note takers in academic and conference environments.)

Much more, of course, could and should be developed on the importance of silence and contemplative voice. In this section, I have aimed to offer a taste of the importance of silence for knowing God and for just moral action in relation to the silence of deafness. Such silence therefore appears as a Deaf Gain. Silence, I suggest, needs to be recovered and discussed in much more detail, as part of what deaf people bring and contribute to a church that stands in need of more and better silence. This is not to say that deaf people always experience or use silence well, nor that silence always becomes contemplative. It is, however, to put the silences of both deafness and contemplation in stark contrast to the problems of silence that the medical model and mainstream theology articulate.

For all that silence is a good in Christian tradition, it is still a limited good. Indeed, the very practice of contemplative silence itself demonstrates the ways the goods of our earthly existence are limited goods. Contemplative silence helps people be aware of bodily limits (deafness, as well as other kinds of limits), and, in becoming aware of our limitations, we may become even more able to respond to and receive God. In the next section, I conclude with a discussion of the caveats of understanding the benefits of silence as Deaf Gain.

THE LIMITS OF DEAF GAIN: EMBODIMENT AND THE WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Predominant models of thinking about disability, the medical model discussed in the first section as well as the social model discussed in the above section, are troubling from a theological point of view. A medical model presumes that normalcy, as humans have typically defined it, equates with what God understands as "good." Yet, normalcy would seem to be precisely that which God critiques in scripture and tradition. It is not the normal, and especially the supernormal, whom God champions, but rather the poor, the meek, and the lowly.

The social model of disability has much to recommend it. Deaf Gain helps us see the importance of silence, both for deaf people and for the Christian tradition. Yet, the social model, which suggests that disability exists primarily where societies refuse to provide

[36] See, for example, Mareike D. Wieth and Bruce D. Burns, "Rewarding Multitasking: Negative Effects of an Incentive on Problem Solving Under Divided Attention," *Journal of Problem Solving* 7, no. 1 (2014): 60-72. The authors provide an overview of previous literature as well as demonstrate in their own study how multitasking continues to be an issue.

accommodations for those with disabilities, also falls short theologically. While social models rightly critique society's lack of responsiveness in building ramps or accessible bathrooms or other design features, social models often ignore or bypass a disabled individual's experience with disability by focusing so intently on making social changes. In promoting social barriers as a main reason for why people with disabilities encounter problems and difficulties, disability itself becomes included in the realm of what ought to count as normal. A social model enables and embraces people of all abilities and says that pretty much all abilities ought to be taken as goods. The proponents of Deaf Gain fit very well in the social model vision, taking a view of deafness as an unmitigated good that all people should welcome.

Theologian Deborah Creamer describes well some of the theological problems with the social model of disability. She suggests that the social model creates a "new normal" that appropriates deafness, for example, as a de facto good. In creating this de facto good, however, there is the negative effect of making any people who experience discomfort, pain, or unhappiness with their disabilities feel excluded.[37] Ironically, the social model's good impulses to embrace others who are different also creates barriers of acceptance – especially acceptance of the idea that deafness is not an unmitigated good. In turn, this prevents a fuller development and articulation of important theological concepts in relation to disability. For example, standing with those who are suffering is one way of practicing mercy and love. Suffering is also understood in some theological traditions as linked to the suffering of Christ, which can lead to some quite deep theological concepts about Christ, suffering, and life and death.

Creamer's alternative is a concept she calls "embodied limits."[38] Embodied limits stand, for Christians, as an alternative to either medical models of disability or to social models of disability that seek to include people with disabilities in mainstream society. Embodied limits enable all of us, disabled or not, to recognize the truth of what it means to be human: that we are embodied and that very embodiedness includes and creates limits. Limits can be painful and engender suffering. Limits mean that disabilities, including deafness, are not unmitigated goods, however much we might like them to be, but rather are "goods" only insofar as they are recognized as pertaining to everyone.

When it comes to critiquing Deaf Gain as a social model and offering an alternative, the silence of contemplation presents a help for

---

[37] Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

[38] Creamer especially describes embodied limits in *Disability and Christian Theology*, chapter five.

Christians. First, the very fact of our silent contemplation will quickly mean that we come face to face with our own goodness and woundedness. We will recognize our embodied limits. Recognizing those limits, however, can be, and usually is, very painful. We confront the fact that disability is not an absolute good, even as the disability of deafness can offer speedy entry into spiritual life with God. Martin Laird writes extensively on this aspect of the contemplative life.

> The doorway into the silent land is a wound. Silence lays bare this wound. We do not journey far along the spiritual path before we get some sense of the wound of the human condition, and this is precisely why not a few abandon a contemplative practice like meditation as soon as it begins to expose this wound; they move on instead to some spiritual entertainment that will maintain distraction. Perhaps this is why the weak and wounded, who know very well the vulnerability of the human condition, often have an aptitude for discovering silence and can sense the wholeness and healing that ground this wound.[39]

It is not a given that people will participate in silence, nor embrace the silence of contemplation, even if it is the condition of their physical lives in deafness. Those who are deaf do not necessarily willingly embrace deafness and the silence that goes with it. While we saw ways in which the silence of deafness can be tranquil, we cannot avoid the pain of deafness as exclusion. The silence of deafness separates the deaf from the social life of the hearing. That separation can be excruciatingly painful.

Laird presumes a hearing audience, an audience whose wounds appear to become no less excruciating when exposed to silence, even if that silence is not physically imposed in deafness. Yet, where those who are not deaf are free to leave aside contemplation in search of "entertainments," those who are deaf do not have such freedom. For Laird, this is positive, and he even goes on to suggest that the weak and wounded "often have an aptitude" for contemplation. That aptitude is not a given. Whether people receive silence willingly or unwillingly, they must at least be willing to confront wounds and suffering, even to embrace wounds as suffering as Jesus did on the cross.

Christian contemplation has a long tradition of contemplating God's broken and bruised body on the cross. In that contemplation, we marvel at how God has taken on human suffering – a marvel that can only be had if we trudge through the truth of our own embodied limits and suffering. Laird notes, "Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, wounds, failure, disgrace, death itself all have a

[39] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 117.

hidden potential for revealing our deepest ground in God. Our wounds bear the perfumed trace of divine presence."[40] Silence does not avoid wounds or suffering, it runs straight toward them, especially in the Christian's focus on Christ's own life. We thus delve into the mystery of how death becomes life. Saint John of the Cross writes in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, "O sweet cautery,/ O delightful wound!/ O gentle hand! O delicate touch/ That tastes of eternal life/ And pays every debt!/ In killing you changed death to life."[41] The saint goes on to describe how the Holy Spirit is the cautery and the wound that leads us to God himself. God is encountered in our embodied limits.

Contemplation is not exclusive of other ways of meeting Christ that do not focus on such suffering. Part of what can be learned from this particular means of contemplation is that the wounds of Christ enable a different vision of hearing loss/Deaf Gain. Just as contemplative silence pointed us toward seeing the goodness of the physical silence encountered in hearing loss, so too the knowledge of contemplative silence points us toward the limits of physical silence, and the limits of being deaf. Put more boldly, contemplation itself asks Christians to confront their own limits, not by necessarily calling those limits good, but by allowing those limits simply to be there. Thus, Deaf Gain becomes rightly positioned as a relative gain, a gain that offers an important corrective to medical models of deafness that constantly seek to fix hearing loss. Deaf Gain, as a pattern of thought, understands the goodness that can come from various aspects of hearing loss as well as the manifold ways in which humans are limited.

Contemplation, however, takes people still further than the goods afforded by Deaf Gain suggest. Contemplative prayer, typically done in silence, understands that the silence of deafness cannot and should not always be seen as a good. Sometimes, people will simply not recognize silence as a gift, especially that which results from hearing loss. More significantly, silence can wound. It can be the cause of disruptions of relationships, of hurt, of misinterpreted conversations and lost meanings.

Instead, contemplative prayer asks practitioners to take an approach that acknowledges wounds, pain, disruption, but "to move through struggle; and the only way through is through – not around, over, under, or alongside, but through."[42] Thus, in contemplative practice, people can both embrace some of the beauty and blessedness that silence can bring, as well as acknowledge that silence can harm and hurt. Silence can cause separation between people, socially disrupt

[40] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 120.
[41] Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1953), Stanza 2.
[42] Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 123.

lives, and lead to the detrimental aspects of health considered in section one.

It is important, too, to note that physical silence is meant to be a beginning point in the spiritual life. Physical silence is not the point of contemplative prayer, even though much of the tradition deems physical silence to be necessary especially when a person begins the practice. Thus, some of those who practice silence hope to progress in their prayer lives to the point that noise ceases to become a distraction, such that people can be with others, even noisy others, and attend to those others' needs without losing the practice of the presence of God. However, physical silence is not an end in itself but part of the means of contemplative prayer. In understanding this aspect of contemplative prayer, we can also see how the physical silence of deafness is a limit. It can provide an entry into silent contemplation. Those who are deaf can help others learn how to embrace the physical silence that can be so uncomfortable to those who hear.

One of the most celebrated contemplatives, Teresa of Avila, when writing her famous *Interior Castle*, a description of contemplative prayer and its stages, describes her head being full of noise. Teresa suffered from tinnitus, a condition that causes ringing and other noises in the ears. It is also a condition strongly linked to hearing loss. Teresa describes, "As I write this, the noises in my head are so loud that I am beginning to wonder what is going on in it. As I said at the outset, they have been making it almost impossible for me to obey those who commanded me to write. My head sounds just as if it were full of brimming rivers, and then as if all the water in those rivers came suddenly rushing downward."[43]

She observes all the noise in her head with a kind of detachment, however, and with a view toward incorporating even the turmoil of her tinnitus with her union with God. She writes, "I should not be surprised to know that the Lord has been pleased to send me this trouble in my head so that I may understand it better, for all this physical turmoil is no hindrance either to my prayer or to what I am saying now, but the tranquility and love in my soul are quite unaffected, and so are its desires and clearness of mind."[44] For Teresa, God is present in the turmoil of the tinnitus. She wonders if perhaps God is even especially speaking to her in her tinnitus. Her awareness of her physical condition does not prevent a relationship with God, nor prevent her prayer, nor cause her to pray for the removal of tinnitus. Rather, the tinnitus simply exists, and she constantly aims toward God no matter what her physical state is. Thus, physical silence may not remain permanent, but a person ought to be able to cultivate the

[43] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, IV.1. *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, ed. Allison Peers (New York: Burns and Oates, 2002).
[44] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, IV.1.

benefits of silence even in the midst of the busy world. Or, as Martin Laird observes: "We learn to meet sound that displeases with the same stillness with which we meet the sounds that please us…."[45]

CONCLUSIONS

Meditation on deafness as Deaf Gain should rightfully cause us also to meditate more on a key aspect of deafness that Christian tradition has overlooked: the presumed problem with deafness (its silence) is also the seat of contemplative Christian practice. Silence is important. However, contemplation does not lead us to see deafness as an unmitigated good but to place deafness in relation to Christ's own life.

There are implications for Deaf Gain, and especially for the silence of both deafness and contemplation, on the fields of Christian theology of disability and moral theology. A Christian theology of disability might uncover surprises when it investigates disability not chiefly as a loss. but as a gain, just as a discussion of the silence of hearing loss deepens into a meditation on contemplation as a practice toward which all Christians should aim.

In relation to moral theology, my discussion of contemplation raises some intriguing questions about links between contemplative silence and the practices of justice and truth, as well as what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. I have here only begun to develop this angle. More work needs to be done in describing more fully how moral life and contemplative silence might be linked and, in turn, what that means for Christians as they seek to live lives of justice in the contemporary world. M

[45] Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 49.