



"... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak..." - Ecclesiastes 3:7

Dear Friends,

Sometimes in the church we find ourselves facing difficult decisions. You may be at a session meeting, a presbytery meeting, or a meeting of the congregation where not everyone is of the same mind. As you prayerfully consider the decision before you and hear others sharing their wisdom on both sides of the question, the Spirit may move you toward a strong conviction. When the discussion is over and the vote is taken, you will vote "yes" or "no."

But not everyone chooses to vote on every question. If you have a financial stake in the decision, you should refrain from voting. If you feel compelled by conscience not to vote either "yes" or "no," you may refrain from voting. These are good reasons for someone who is entitled to vote on a question to *abstain*. You may notice, however, that when a question is put to a vote, the presiding officer asks to hear only from those who wish to vote "yes" or "in favor," and then from those who wish to vote "no" or "opposed." Why is no opportunity provided for those who abstain to state explicitly their wish not to vote?

The *Book of Order* requires that meetings be conducted according to the most recent edition of *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised*, except when it is in contradiction to the PCUSA Constitution (G-3.0105). *Robert's Rules of Order* provides the following explanation:

The chair should not call for abstentions in taking a vote, since the number of members who respond to such a call is meaningless. To "abstain" means not to vote at all, and a member who makes no response if "abstentions" are called for abstains just as much as one who responds to that effect....

To put it slightly differently, there is a contradiction in asking people to *speak* in order to be counted as silent. Instead, we let the silence speak for itself.

Silence can be powerful, prophetic, even compassionate. When Job's friends first gathered to accompany him, "[t]hey sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was great" (Job 2:13). When they finally open their mouths to speak, though, Job tells them their words are breaking him in pieces (19:1). When we judge that adding our voice is not helpful to our neighbor or to our community, we should keep silence.

May God's Spirit grant you the wisdom to know the time to keep silence, and the time to speak.

Grace and Peace,
Rev. David Baer, Stated Clerk