

“Listen More”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Lent
February 25, 2018

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:15-17

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Introduction

As we move through Lent, we continue to reflect on passages of scripture which draw our attention to God’s desire for us to live lives conformed more closely to God’s will. This passage from Psalm 51 reminds us that while ritual and worship are important, what God really desires of us is changed lives that reflect a desire to live into the principles of God’s Kingdom. With this in mind, we continue our Lenten series which explores spiritual practices we can add to enrich our lives of faith, as opposed to the practice of self-denial which is so often a tradition during this season of repentance.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 8:40-48

⁴⁰Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. ⁴¹Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus’ feet and begged him to come to his house, ⁴²for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. ⁴³Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.” ⁴⁶But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” ⁴⁷When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”



Sermon: *“Listen More”*

In the 2012 movie *Up in the Air*,¹ George Clooney plays a business man who spends upwards of 300 days a year on the road. In one scene meant to depict the routine of flight, a flight attendant pours him a drink during the in-flight drink service. After filling his cup, the attendant asks him “Do you want the cancer?”

Clooney’s character is taken aback. “The what?”

She asks him again, “Do you want the cancer?”

There is a moment of confusion as you can see Clooney struggling to understand the ramifications of the words he just heard. To clarify, he repeats back to the flight attendant what he thinks she said to him: “The cancer?”

¹ Reitman, Jason, director. *Up in the Air*. Performance by George Clooney, et al., Paramount Pictures, 2009.

Sensing his confusion, the flight attendant holds up the drink she was just pouring for him and repeats “The can... sir?”

The scene speaks to the way flight attendants can become a part of the background for many passengers. Every time I fly, I am struck by the way people will completely ignore them during the pre-flight safety announcements. Yes, I know, we’ve heard it all before, but still, another person is actually talking to you. How do you just ignore them like they’re not even there? That’s just seems rude to me.

Communication is important, but as important as it is to enunciate and to speak clearly, it is just as important, if not more so, to *listen*. The old cliché is that we’ve got one mouth but two ears, so listening must be twice as important as speaking. But if an alien landed on earth and had no other way of getting to know what Americans are all about except our social media and our cable news, they’d probably be forgiven for thinking it’s the other way around.

Jesus recognized the value of listening. Most people have heard the story of the hemorrhaging woman. It’s a Sunday school standard. But while it is a remarkable story of healing, it is also an example of Jesus investing his time in a person that the community had left behind. And this episode is made more poignant by the stature of the man Jesus was on his way to help at the time.

This story begins with Jesus being called to help an important man. How do we know he’s important? Well, we are told that he is “a leader of the synagogue.” By virtue of that position, he would have been a very prominent, respected figure in the community. But perhaps more to the point, we know he is important because we are told his name: Jairus.

Think about how important names are when you tell a story.

“This guy walks up to me and says...”

“Which guy?”

“Oh, just some guy that worked there...”

Compare that to this:

“Dr. Johnson walks up to me and says...”

“Oh yes, the chair of the department. Go on...”

That we are told his name underscores his importance to the community.

Contrast that with the woman in this story. We know nothing of her position or to whom she is related. She is identified only by her affliction. Her menstrual flow which should have lasted her only a few days, has continued for 12 years. When we look back into the ritual cleanliness laws of Leviticus, we learn that a woman during this particular time of the month, was considered ritually unclean, which means that everyone she touches also becomes unclean and she must withdraw from the worship life of the community.²

So, for 12 years, this woman has essentially been an outcast. Because of her condition people would have treated her differently.

² Leviticus 15:19-33, NRSV

And the author doesn't tell us her name. Why bother? She is such an inconsequential figure in the community that the author probably doesn't even know, or see any real reason to find out, her name.

So, Jesus, on his way to the home of the prominent figure, stops to help an inconsequential one. This is scandalous. It would be as if an ambulance on the way to the home of someone famous and important like Mayor Ginther or Urban Meyer or Les Wexner, stopped on the way to help a homeless man laying on the sidewalk.

But Jesus doesn't *have* to actually stop. The woman reaches out to touch Jesus and that is enough to heal her. Jesus *chooses* to stop to find out who has touched him. The disciples are incredulous. They are surrounded by crowds. They've been getting bumped and jostled by the crowds all day. Considering all the people around them, it would have only been noteworthy had he *not* been touched.

But Jesus feels the power leave him and wants to meet the person who has been healed. Luke tells us that the woman "declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed." How long did it take her to tell her story? 30 seconds? A minute? Five minutes? Because when she is finished, Luke tells us that Jesus replies "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" which means that he stayed around to listen.

There's an emergency at the house of Jairus. Jesus is on his way to heal Jairus' sick daughter. We would have understood if Jesus had allowed this nameless woman to receive healing and continued on his way. We would understand if he simply acknowledged her and went on. But Jesus stops and makes time to hear this woman's story; to listen to her and to understand her situation. And that's an important part of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Over and over and over again, we see Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors and people the Pharisees and religious authorities considered unimportant. And in this we are reminded that a tremendous part of loving one another is taking the time to listen to one another.

Part of our problem in this country that helps us to be so divided so much of the time is that we don't really listen to each other. And even when we *do* engage with another person in constructive conversation, we are too often formulating our own arguments and responses and not really *listening* to what the other person is saying. Even in regular, every day conversation, we can become preoccupied with our own worries or responsibilities, what we are going to do next, that we don't really listen to the people with whom we are trying to be present.

There's a reason Luke inserts this story of the hemorrhaging woman into the story of Jairus and his daughter. It shows that for Jesus, even the people we deem unimportant are valuable. It shows that even when Jesus was in a hurry to get to someone who the community saw as truly important, he would not ignore need. It shows that every person has a story, and Jesus took the time to listen. We learn a few things from that small detail.

1. Listening helps us get to know one another.

As my mother always said, you can't tell a book by it's cover. And when we take the time to listen to people, really hear them, and get to know their stories, their experiences, why they believe what they believe, we begin to understand them. And then we can empathize with them. We can love them.

When I was in about sixth grade a family moved into our town. They had a son and daughter that were in my grade and another daughter a couple of years younger. The kids went to my school and the family joined our church.

The son and younger daughter seemed “pretty normal” to my young mind, but the daughter who was in my grade, Karen, was mean as a snake. Never seemed to be in a good mood. Just always seemed to have something ugly to say. I didn’t like her. As much as my mom encouraged me to be her friend, I couldn’t do it. Needless to say, I rarely talked to her.

Several years later, I learned Karen’s story. Her parents had gotten divorced and her mom had married someone new. Her mom moved Karen to my town with her new husband and his two children. This little girl, right in the beginning of adolescence, lost her father, and then got moved away from her home, away from her friends, from her school, her church, and was thrust into a new family, in a new town where everything was strange and different.

Of course, she was defensive. Of course, she wouldn’t let anyone in. Her life had been turned upside down and she was hurt and angry about it. *That* was what my mother had been trying to explain to me, but I wouldn’t listen.

Everyone has a story. And if we can take the time to listen to one another, we can begin to understand one another. And if we can understand one another, we can begin to empathize and find common ground.

2. Listening is a way to show someone they are valued.

The best way to show someone they are *unimportant* is to ignore them. That’s why you’ll get such a negative reaction from people if you take out your phone and start playing with it while they’re talking. Because by not giving them your whole attention, you send the message that you aren’t really listening and that they aren’t really important.

I used to know a man named Kenny. Now Kenny was not technically homeless because he had a place to stay at night, but it wasn’t really the kind of home most of us would feel comfortable in. Kenny walked the streets most days, looking for a little work, and trying to stay out of trouble with the police, but life was hard for Kenny. He used to come by the church every now and then and we would talk if I had time, and sometimes I would buy him lunch.

One of the things I learned about Kenny, was that people *wouldn’t* usually talk to him. He liked to have long conversations about theology and politics, but when he struck up a conversation with someone, they invariably thought he was trying to hit them up for money and they would either give him some or not, but either way, they didn’t want to be bothered to spend time with him.

He told me once, “I just want to talk to someone. People are willing to help, but nobody wants to just sit and talk.” I realized that day that people we value are people we listen to. Often Christians, who thought they were helping by giving money and walking away, were also helping to perpetuate his loneliness and isolation. I was guilty of it too, sometimes.

But people have a basic need to be heard. And by listening to one another’s stories, we come to understand each other a little better. And when we understand each other, the barriers drop just a little, the divisions begin to heal; we begin to see each other as people, with stories, and wounds, and joys. When we listen, we communicate to other people that they matter.

3. When we listen to people with whom we disagree, we can begin to bridge the divide.

Americans love to debate. But we’re sometimes short on dialogue. The difference is that in a debate people are trying to change one another’s minds. In dialogue, people listen to one another with the very

real possibility that their minds might be changed.

In 2001, The General Assembly of the PCUSA, recognizing that there were issues over which members and churches were fighting and becoming divided, formed a task force to work out how we as the church can work through our differences of opinion and “maintain the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the church.”³

That task force was made up of people from all sides of very divisive issues. People on the left and right were put in a room together and charged with helping the church heal. That task force met for five years, studying the issues over which members and congregations seemed to be divided. One of the biggest of these was the issue of homosexuality in the church. For years we had been debating whether someone could be gay or lesbian and still be a member in good standing or, more contentious yet, be eligible for ordination as either an officer in the church or a minister of word and sacrament.

Ultimately their recommendation to the General Assembly was to allow Sessions to discern whether a member of their congregation meets the standards for ordination for elders and deacons and for Presbyteries to discern whether individuals meet the standards for ministers.

But in the course of their work, they realized that they were guilty of the very same divisive attitudes and practices that were ripping the church apart. Too much debate, not enough dialogue; and so, they began an intentional process of listening to one another. Opening their hearts and minds and seeking, not to win, but to learn and understand.

Which resulted in a series of statements in their final report that may have been the most important thing to come out of the entire process. Those statements read in part:

Those of us who identify our views as liberal came to understand how alienating it is for conservatives and evangelicals when their passionate commitment to holy living and upright conduct are labeled rigid and judgmental.

Those of us who identify our views as conservative came to understand how alienating it is for liberals when their passionate commitment to justice and compassion are labeled unbiblical.

Those of us who identify our views as moderate came to understand how alienating it is when those with passionate concerns on either end of the theological spectrum are labeled extreme and divisive.

Many of us also came to understand how alienating it is for those who support a ban on the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons to be accused of prejudice, and how alienating it is for those who oppose such a ban to be accused of moral laxity.

All of us came to see that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in its current factionalized state that we have all created together by our mutual stereotyping

³ Achtemeier, Mark, et al. *A Season of Discernment: The Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church*. Presbyterian Church (USA), 2006, www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf.

and misuse of power, fails to offer a suffering world a sign of the peace, unity, and purity that is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ.⁴

Can you imagine what would happen if we were able to undertake a similar process of listening and trying to understand other people on matters over which we are so divided, like gun violence and abortion and immigration? How might our community and our country be changed by listening, really listening to one another and trying to hear and understand one another's fears and concerns?

4. Being a disciple means listening for God's voice.

Sixteen times in the gospels Jesus tells someone to "Listen." He understands that His method of teaching, travelling about outdoors, speaking to groups of people who may be on their way to market or to labor in the fields, standing on a fishing boat, shouting to be heard above the noise and cacophony of the world around Him made listening terribly important. Jesus understood that if people were going to learn anything they would need to listen.

It is therefore extremely important that when we pray, we don't just talk to God about what we need, but that we also be still and listen for what God needs us to hear. And we need to turn off the electronics, put away the agendas, set aside the distractions with which we fill our days and start paying attention; start really listening for God's voice in the world around us.

God is speaking to us. Sometimes God is shouting at us. But we can't always hear, because we're not always listening. What might we be missing? In this season of Lent, let us commit ourselves to growing as disciples. Let us commit ourselves to listening more; to God, and to one another.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁴ Achtemeier, Mark, et al. *A Season of Discernment...* p.12, lines 320-328, & 332-339