

Pastor Kevin Garman
Theme: Listening
Scripture: Psalm 78:1-8
November 8th, 2020

Listening for the Goodness in Life

Last week, we celebrated All Saints Sunday. A day where we reflect on grief, pain, and loss of our loved ones whom we loved and celebrated. We looked at the Beatitudes to find hope in such tumultuous, tense times, such as this. We had some wonderful music and prayers as we communally acknowledged our grief and loss together. This week our focus shifts to listening. Listening at this time is important for many different reasons.

The most obvious reason is the conclusion of the most polarizing election in decades as the United States sent in mail in ballots, traveled to poll booths, and voted for the candidate they thought most likely to be best for our country. We have certainly failed to listen to one another in our pain and fear of each other throughout the years, but listening is more important now than ever to hear each other in our frustration, anger, and fear. It will not be easy, but in order to stay true to our values as Christians, values like love, peace, joy, justice, and redemption, we must listen to one another.

Listening is also important to our calendar year as the season of Advent is only three weeks away. Advent is, simply put, a time of anticipation and preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ. Advent is a time where we self-reflect on who we are, what we have done, and where we are going, as a church, as an individual, as a regional community, and as a body of Christ as we all participate in the season of Advent. This time of anticipation and preparation is fitting as we all start to bunker down with the winter months rapidly approaching as the world seems to slow down in the winter and the stillness of the season forces us to listen.

I want to make it clear that listening is one of our Christian values as the world cries out around us. They cry out for loss of jobs and sense of security, both for their future and their financial well-being. They cry out in the name of justice for folks like Walter Wallace Jr. shot at the hands of the law. They cry out for the protection and conservation of our beautiful planet and animals as the world around us burns, floods, and melts. They cry out for someone to acknowledge their pain we have caused one another in our pursuit of greed, wealth, and power in our

political systems all throughout the world. We have failed to listen to one another. Listening, I think, should be one of our core values as Christians.

It is fairly uncommon to preach on the Psalms as your main scriptural focus for your sermon. It isn't unheard of, but it is not something I typically do, nor is it the common practice of most pastors, but I feel as if the Psalms, which are more songs and poems than anything, provide an important lesson for us to learn this week. Most psalms, but certainly not all, are relatively short since they are more poetic and tend to be read or played as songs. Even though we just read an excerpt this morning, Psalm 78 is rather long for the Book of Psalms. It's a message is vital to our current moment.

The verses we read today pull from the words of Deuteronomy, which was the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert searching for a home, hope, and place of refuge as they journeyed on to the Promised Land. It invokes a sense of hope and restoration as the Psalmist reminds the people of the work and journey of their ancestors. It was the law of Jacob that was established, it was the Instruction Moses passed down to the people, and it was our ancestors and community that passed down these traditions, these blessings, these values to instill in each of us a sense of purpose, tradition, and pride (78:5). It reminds us of our stubbornness, our unfaithfulness to each other, and our forgetfulness (78:6-7).

Verses 1 & 4 in my Common English Bible translation read like this, "1 Listen, my people, to my teaching, tilt your ears toward the words of my mouth. 4 We won't hide from their descendants; we'll tell the next generation all about the praise due the Lord and his strength--the wondrous works God has done (Psalm 1&4 CEB). From the very opening of the Psalm, the leader challenges us to listen and be reminded of the goodness we still have in our lives. The Psalm refers to one of the most difficult moments in the Israelites' history as they wander through the desert, as they had no place to call home, and as they were refugees wandering from city to city as people only saw them as outcasts and enemies instead of listening to the Israelites' needs, hopes, and dreams and to see their humanity and welcome them.

Throughout the remainder of the Psalm, the leader recounts the story of Exodus as the Israelites were delivered from enslavement from their oppressors. The people are reminded of the manna that God sent them in order for them to survive as they starved in the wilderness. The Psalm reminds its listeners the story of David leading his people and regardless of his shortcomings, become the leader the people needed, which was a shepherd tending to his flock. This image of

the shepherd certainly invokes what we now understand the life and ministry of Jesus as we approach Advent.

So how do we listen to one another? Well first I think we must learn how to value one another. Labels are necessary and important in their own way, but when we only view people based off their label, I think we only see a snapshot of who they truly are. I don't think we will stop addressing ourselves by certain labels, but instead of casting judgement on someone when they say who they are, ask people if they could explain that to you more. Labels are just a glimpse of part of our being. Don't let our labels separate us and don't let your labels blind you to hurt, persecute, and dehumanize others.

Once we learn to value each other and learn about each other a little more, we can learn to trust each other. Trust is difficult and doesn't happen overnight or even over a couple months, but it is vital to any relationship. If you do not have a foundation of trust in your marriage, friendships, or parenting, then you probably aren't going to get very far in your relationship as you try and find the flaws in others or determine how they are going to hurt you. If we learn to trust each other, then we can learn to work together. Trust is only built by learning how to care about each other through valuing each other's humanity and experience.

I believe another core piece of listening to one another is empathy. In all of my pastoral care courses at Iliff School of Theology, we talked about active listening. Active listening is not a type of listening that forces you to react to what a person just said to keep the conversation going, but active listening is a response to what the person says so you create a dialogue together. For example, if _____ said, "Pastor Kevin, I'm hurting today" and I responded, "Oh well, I have been hurt in my life too." I am just reacting to what that person said. However, if they say, "Pastor Kevin, I'm hurting today," and I respond, "I'm sorry you are hurting. How are you hurting and what does that pain feel like?" I am responding to what someone says. Active listening is hard and a process to learn and practice, but when we respond to each other through empathy, we learn to see life from a different perspective than our own experience and learn to see life from a different lens. We are able to hear and sometimes feel someone else's pain even though we may not have experienced what that person is describing. Through active listening, we are able to engage with one another to build loving, nurturing relationships just like this image of the shepherd that the Psalmist provides.

In closing, I am a follower of Jesus, and Jesus, no doubt, listened to people in his ministry. He would not have been able to bring together tax collectors, tradesman, zealots, revolutionists, leaders of the communities, prophets, and hopeless people without listening and responding to their needs and pain. As a

follower of Jesus, the gospel compels me to seek justice, love kindness, and grow in humility as I walk with God. As a follower of Jesus, I am called to love my neighbor no matter who my neighbor is because this is what love looks like. As a follower of Jesus, my God hears my cries of grief and hopelessness like God heard the cries of the Israelites and seeks to deliver us from oppressive structures and powers that be in order to bring about a more equitable, loving world. As a follower of Jesus, I am invited to participate in the table of grace as we listen to each other's needs in our journey of redemption and reconciliation.

Let us not forget in the days to come that we are followers of Jesus, not just Republicans or Democrats. We are followers of Jesus, not just Montanans and Americans. We are followers of Jesus who are called to spread the good news to all those in need because we cannot bring about the Kingdom of God without listening to our neighbors' hopelessness and fear. Jesus taught us to transcend those walls that divide us and separate us from listening to each other. May we walk in grace and mercy with one another in the coming days because the world needs us to listen to one another with open hearts, open minds, and open our doors to all those who need respite and shelter. May the Divine bless us and hold near its heart as we walk on this journey together. Amen.