

Changing times requires deep listening before action.

Psalm 19; Matthew 21:33-46

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

As we continue to dwell in the inbetween, in a state of unknowing, we can be assured that we are not alone, and that we have been left to our devices, though it may seem like we have.

Today is World Wide Communion, a day when we engage in a ritual that began at the last supper with Jesus and his disciples. It is a time honoured ritual that reminds us to take time to remember who Jesus was, what Jesus did, and why God gave the world Jesus. We remember that Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry. He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender identity. He preached and practiced unconditional love – love of God, love of neighbour, love of friend, and love of enemy. Through his life, death and resurrection we have been redeemed, and we are called to live out his commandment to love one another as he loved us.¹

The gospel reading today can seem harsh and difficult. We are invited to look at this text as an allegory text. “In it God is the landowner, the land of Israel is the vineyard, the members of the Jewish religious establishment are the tenant farmers, the prophets of the OT are the representatives of God who came to collect what was due, and Jesus is the son who finally came to collect and who was killed, and the church is the group invited to work in the vineyard at the end of the parable.”² Israel rejected God. We too, reject God when we reject the work of God as creator and sustainer of the universe.

In this post-modern world, we can no longer make such sweeping declarations. There are shades of gray in this. At the heart of this passage we are being invited to consider what we have done to hurt others. And we are begin reminded that the stone that has been rejected has become the corner stone. Marvin McMickle, a preacher writes:

¹ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada, 2006.

² Marvin A. McMickle, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 141.

“When we turn to that stone that the builders rejected, it will break us down too – but only so that it can build us up again. The stone will take away our pride and prejudice, our sin and selfishness, our greed and guilt. Once we have been brought down, the stone begins to build our lives upon a strong spiritual foundation. As the spiritual building goes up, we will see peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and finally self-control taking up residence in our lives.”³

Prayerful listening or to put it another way, discernment is what is required of us right now. We need to engage in deep listening. We need to prayerfully reflect. AND we need to do this as a community of faith. We need to turn our focus on God, or risk the possibility of not hearing what God is saying to us in this time and space.

Psalm 19 states that the heavens are speaking about God and all that God has done and is doing. The words and the wisdom are shared far and wide, without words, without voice...and yet the voice goes throughout the world. But we do not hear them. We need to listen...

In one of the discussions this week we were talking about Quaker practice and what we could learn from the Quakers. When Quakers come together they spend their time in collective silence waiting to hear what wisdom will emerge. Individual are tasked with the responsibility of holding a space and listening deeply. At times someone might receive a message that needs to be shared with the group and it is spoken. Often nothing is spoken within the first 10 to 20 minutes and sometimes much later. The gathered group of people hear those words spoken and then re-enter silence. They then reflect in silence about these words and then collectively the group is invited to add to those words if they too receive a message. After hearing the words of someone else, a person might receive something that ties in to what was shared which then takes the reflection to a deeper level. This process requires a lot of self-discipline, patience, and openness we too as Christian faith communities right now and is liminal space are speaking the collective wisdom of the group

Last week I spoke about being in God’s waiting room. That this is a great image for what we are experiencing these days. We are in need of healing, we are seeking wholeness, and so we go to God for help. We had an interesting discussion about this at God on Tap this past week. I asked the group to image that they were in God’s waiting room, and why they were there. What we discovered in that moment, is that there are several waiting rooms. Were we in a hospital waiting room? Had we died and were in the waiting room to of eternal life? Were we in the waiting room of a psychologist? The waiting room that I think the faith community needs to enter is one of a Spiritual Director, and the prescription that God is giving to us today is to DEEPLY LISTENING. God is inviting us to enter the stillness that comes with deep listening, it is a quiet place where we give God our full attention. Susan Beaumont defines stillness as the following.

³ _____, p. 145.

“Stillness is an open state of readiness, awe, and wonder that undergirds a discernment process. Stillness is the condition achieved when we settle into an unknowing, attending, and surrendering stance.”⁴

Last week we explored the idea of what it means to surrender and I realize that this is not a word that fits for everyone. I heard some resistance to this, and some alternative words and ways of looking at it. I wonder if some of us believe that to surrender means to accept everything without question? I do not believe this to be the case. God wants us to come to deeper understandings. Doubt and questions help us to grow in our faith. I am not suggesting that we need to blindly accept faith. Surrender is about acceptance and letting go in order to make space to attune to God. This is one of the spiritual shifts that Rev. Beaumont suggests need to happen when living in a liminal space. The second spiritual shift that needs to happen is moving from advocating to attending. “Attending is a capacity for deep seeing and listening, it is about becoming fully awake to all that is happening. Often it is only when we fail that we break open and are ready to receive.

She writes:

“An attending stance invites me to love God and others in the situation directly in front of me. I avoid adopting an opinion cause, principle or targeted outcome. I embrace the fullness of the present moment for all that it teaches me. I open all my sense to experience the situation before me through the divine consciousness that dwells within it and within me.”⁵

If we spend our time advocating we risk hearing God’s words as described in today’s psalm. Our social justice approach in the past has been one of advocating. How would it look if we were to attend instead? Could this Spiritual shift help us to address systemic racism in a way that shifts the long standing harm that has been done by all institutions? How do we put aside our own need for comfort in order to hear and truly listen to what is being said by people who have been mistreated, abused, and hurt? How have we perpetuated harm against others by advocating for them? Even when our intention was not to harm but to help? The psalms tells us that we need to attune and attend to God. God’s law revives and refreshes the soul. God’s precepts provide us with wisdom. God’s commandments protect the human community allow us to rejoice instead of complain. The Fear of God is pure and enlightening, it can wake us up. And finally God’s ordinances are righteous and true.

We are called to listen to God’s words, listen to God’s voice, listen to God’s wisdom. To be present. And we pray to God that through this deep listening the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts are acceptable to God.

⁴ Rev. Susan Beaumont, “How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going. Leading in a Liminal Season.” Kindle Edition, p. 79.

⁵ _____, p. 40.

We pray to God: May what I say be of benefit to all. May what I say bring peace into this world. May what I say and do reflect God's love and grace in the world. God gave Moses the 10 commandments. The commandments are God's way of protecting the human community against dehumanization. We need to see a command as a way of coming into communion with God. We shared this modern day version of the 10 commandments last year, and I would like to share them with you again today.

“Practice loyalty to the Sacred. Do not forget that any given image of God is only a glimpse. Do not use God's name to do harm. Do not let life be defined by productivity. Care for those who have cared for you. Do not be destructive. Be faithful to the commitments you make. Do not take what does not belong to you. Do not hinder justice from coming to fruition. Do not let your internal desires lead you to harm another.

And above all else...Love as you would be loved. Hear these whispered words of God and may they guide you this day, this week, and in this year as we enter a space of transformation.