

Sermon for July 18, 2021 – Are We Listening

A husband & wife were sitting together in the living room. The wife nudged her husband and said, “You weren’t even listening to what I said, were you.” And the husband replied “That’s a strange way to start a conversation”. That’s part of what I am going to talk about this morning – being a good listener. As I was preparing for today, I came across this {poem from a website called A Time to Laugh) entitled “When God Whispers” (author unknown)

The man whispered, “God, speak to me,” and a meadowlark sang.

But the man did not hear.

So the many, “God, speak to me,” and the thunder rolled across the sky.

But the man did not listen.

The man looked around and said, “God, let me see you.” And a star shined brightly.

But the man did not see.

And the man shouted, “God, show me a miracle.” And a new life was born.

But the man did not notice.

So, the man cried out in despair, “Touch me, God, and let me know you are here.”

Where upon, God reached down and touched the man. But the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.

Have you ever read a page in a book & then reread the page because you had missed something important.

Often the scriptures we read on Sunday seem very familiar & we wonder what we can learn from them that we hadn't learned before. I have read today's passage from Samuel many times, but as I read it when preparing for today's service something different jumped out at me. We heard in Samuel that David, after being anointed as king, built himself a beautiful house & then he wanted to build a temple, a house for God. Nathan, a court prophet who was an advisor to David, told him to go ahead as David had been appointed king by God so what he proposed to do must be a good idea, but then later God spoke to Nathan telling him that David was not to build a house for him as his house had been mobile for years. For some reason, this resonated with me. David originally thought he was doing something God would want, but then he learned that that was not what God had in mind for him to do. How do we know when what we are doing is something God is leading us to do or is just something we think God would want us to do.

How do we know what is right? For one thing, God would not want us to do something that would harm others. But how do we know when God is speaking to us? I came across this poem that shows often we don't know just because we aren't really listening. God doesn't always speak in ways we expect. God can speak through nature, internal nudges, friends, dreams, a song, prophets, even the Bible

And then there are times that God speaks & we don't like the answer.

Once David understood God didn't want him building a temple, he listened. That struck me as important. He didn't go ahead thinking he knew better.

Now let's think about the Jewish people of our lectionary passage. All their lives, they had been taught they were "the chosen ones of God". They went so far as walling off the inner sanctum of their church so only Jews could enter.

The Temple that sat in the heart of Jerusalem wasn't built like our churches nowadays. It was a series of walled in courtyards. In the center was the Temple itself. Only priests were allowed inside the Temple, because this represented the very presence of God. Even then, only one priest was allowed to go into the Most Holy Place, and that only once a year. Then the next courtyard was called the Court of Israel. Which meant that only circumcised male Jews were allowed to come in here.

The next courtyard was the court of women. Again, only Jewish women were allowed here.

Then, way out, on the side, was the Court of Gentiles. If you were not a Jew, you were not welcome in any other part of the church. In fact, there was a notice outside of the inner Jewish courtyards saying all trespassers will be executed. (Archeologists have found remnants of this sign)

That brings us to our passage from Ephesians. Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians while he was in prison. He was in prison because he was accused of bringing one of the Gentiles (who, by the way, had turned Christian after Paul teaching him about Jesus) into this sacred space in the Temple – they weren't Jews & even though they were believers of God through Christ, the Jewish custom did not allow this intrusion.

(info from The Bible Guide). Paul is writing to Gentiles who have become Christians. He reminds them that God made humans and no person or race was superior to any other. Paul goes on to say that Jesus died for Jews & Gentiles alike. Jesus was trying to explain to the Jewish people that they had misinterpreted what God wanted them to do. Just because the Jews were circumcised did not mean they were the only people called by God. Paul, teaching about Jesus, said that circumcision was a manmade (ritual) action & did not set them above other people. The peace of Christ overcomes all divisions. Jesus invited all to make peace with God & with one another.

So now to present time. Have we learned anything?? Have we listened to God speaking to us. We know God wants us to love one another and show compassion and caring, yet our outward actions don't always show this.

We still have conflicts between different countries, different races, different religions, different political parties. Many of these people profess a belief in a higher power creating us all as equals, a belief that we should love one another, a belief in treating others as we would like to be treated. And there are prejudices all around us - prejudices against different skin colour, different ways of worshipping, different ways of speaking, different backgrounds.

So why is this happening: It seems what people say they believe to the outside world, they don't seem to believe inside themselves.

Throughout our history as a country, as inhabitants of our planet, there have been many times that people have treated other people as lesser human beings. There have been lots of conflicts between countries & there still are conflicts based on things that happened in the past. This past year in North America, we have heard a lot about the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. And in Canada we have become more aware that our predecessors didn't always make a safe place for black people escaping slavery in the States. We've heard on the news of a Muslim family being run over by a car, just because they were Muslims. We heard of Jewish people being shot while gathering to worship. We've heard evidence of the horrors that went on in residential schools with the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves. This is all very disturbing. We know what happened in the past was wrong, what is happening now is wrong, but what can we do about it. We can't change the past but we have to own it – it did happen – then we need to learn from it and make sure we don't make the same mistakes.

To do this, we need to learn about our Canadian history, about other cultures & customs. We need to talk with minorities & immigrants & make them feel welcome. We need to mourn with those who have lost loved ones. We need to educate ourselves. If we look at young children playing with other kids it doesn't matter to them what their playmates skin colour is, or what language they speak or where they were born. (This reminds me of a blurb on TV a while back, where 2 little friends, boys, one with black skin & one with light coloured skin, come running out dressed in the same outfit and with big smiles say "We are twins. Can you tell us apart?")

This reinforces the 1st part of the Moment for Reflection by Nelson Mandela that I selected for today "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, ..." Nelson Mandela

In the book, *See No Strangers* by Valarie Kaur (I've spoken about this book before, but feel it is a great learning tool), Valarie speaks of looking at everyone & trying to see things from their point of view. She doesn't say we have to agree with them, but try to understand where their thoughts are coming from. She went through many challenges growing up as a coloured person, a Sikh (pronounced Sick not Seek as I had always thought), in the U.S. – challenges from within her own family & the greater outside world. She feels that to get along with each other & bring peace to a chaotic planet, we need to look on everyone as a part of one family and discuss things even if we don't have the same point of view.

A quote from the book on *Loving Others: See No Stranger* "Seeing no stranger begins in wonder. It is to look upon the face of anyone and choose to say: You are a part of me I do not yet know. Wonder is the wellspring for love. Who we wonder about determines whose stories

we hear and whose joy and pain we share. Those we grieve with, those we sit with and weep with, are ultimately those we organize with and advocate for. When a critical mass of people come together to wonder about one another, grieve with one another, and fight with and for one another, we begin to build the solidarity needed for collective liberation and transformation—a solidarity rooted in love.”

That is what Paul was saying when he wrote his letters. We are all God’s children & loved by God. Just because someone says you aren’t “one of them” does not mean you are unworthy or any less than they are. Paul was willing to go to jail because he believed this.

I think many of us think the country of Canada is a great place to live, but realize that not everyone who lives here feels that way and we may feel challenged to do what we can to grow the country in such a way that everyone can some day feel this country is a great place to be.

On the United Church Crest we find the words “*ut omnes unum sint*” (oot om nas oon um zent)— “that all may be one” - this teaching is reinforced in Ephesians: “No longer strangers and aliens” but “members of the household of God.”

May this be shown in our words & our actions as we live each day. May this be so. Amen