

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 14, 2021

Listening to God

To Find Your Own Voice

So I Can Let Go of the Voices of the World

Scripture: Romans 12:2-12

John 3:16-17

I heard some good news this week. If I just follow a simple trick that most people don't know exists, I can lose inches and pounds off my body in a very short time. No need to buy that new expensive exercise machine. No need to diet or torture myself with exercises that don't work. The video that was supposed to attract my attention and the comments under it indicated that it had something to do with soaking my feet in Coca Cola and Lemon. The video that explained this promised to be very short, but after about 10 minutes, it didn't seem any closer to giving me the magic trick. I suspect that if I had stayed on until the end I might either still be listening or they would have been looking for some great amount of money to tell me the secret.

That was only one of the many voices that were eager to talk to me this week.

There are many voices that clamor for our attention. Many of them are eager to sell us the latest whatever or a better life which will be ours as soon as we buy the product or improve our body image and self confidence by owning whatever they are pedaling.

Most of us have learned to recognize those voices and often to ignore them. But there are other voices that are more difficult to dismiss. These are the voices that try to tell us who we are and what to think about ourselves.

Pat Fulbright wrote a book called "Falling Apart and Other Fallacies". In the introduction she describes doing housecleaning for a woman she calls Mrs. Brown. She said that she arrived every Friday morning feeling confident, professional, and like she was someone. However, according to Mrs. Brown she vacuumed too slowly, or maybe too quickly depending upon Mrs. Brown's mood. After Mrs. Brown yelled at her about everything she did, by the time she left, she felt like she was no one.

Mr. Holly was very different. He invited her to use his magnificent stereo system whenever she wanted. She described it this way, "I was not the mopper, the duster, or

the scrubber. I was an eagle flying gracefully over the canyon in the Grand Canyon Suite, or the reformed Eliza Doolittle in 'My Fair Lady.' I reached heights unknown and when I left his house, I always felt good about myself."ⁱ

She identified that "We are born into this world with a certain amount of good self-regard. We say, 'Here I am, world. I deserve to be fed, changed, talked to, and cuddled. I'm going to cry until you meet my needs.' But somewhere along the way, some of us lose those first moments of feeling, 'I'm special.'"ⁱⁱ

Somewhere along the way, we start to pay attention to those voices that come from others. Voices that tell us we aren't good enough, not smart enough, not pretty or handsome enough, generally just not enough. After awhile we start to internalize those voices and for some unknown reason, we find it easier to pay attention to those negative voices than to what may be many other voices telling us that we are special, that we are enough.

Through the years there are many other voices that influence how we see and understand things. For the past few months especially, I've watched how politicians seem to hear a voice that says, "If you are not loyal to the party, or the leader of the party, you won't get reelected." Those voices demand attention and action that seem to deny the individual the right or freedom to think for themselves about what is right or wrong, what is better or worse for the country and the freedom to act upon those insights.

Some of us may have experienced those kinds of voices in our places of employment or in other organizations or in our families. Through the years, these become the voices that have us believing that we shouldn't try something new because we would probably fail, or it will be too complicated for us to learn, or You fill in the blank.

During Lent, we have been intentional about trying to Listen to God and today we are trying to listen to God so that we can find our own voice and let go of the voices of the world. We just heard what is often called the "Gospel in miniature" from John's gospel. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life." Sometimes we don't pay as

much attention to the next verse, “God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

That is Good News! God didn’t send Jesus into the world to judge the world, but to save it. When we pay attention to those voices that tell us we aren’t enough, we are paying attention to voices that are not from God. You see God’s voice tells us that we are loved; that we are chosen; that we are special. God’s voice tells us that we are enough simply because we are God’s children.

Now, that doesn’t mean that anything goes. It doesn’t mean that God is thrilled with every part of us as we are, but it does mean that God loves us and accepts us as we are, and then invites us to grow, to become more like the people God knows that we can be with God’s help.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he lays it out for us when he writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Have you ever really thought about what it means to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind”? If you are like most of us, the answer is probably, “no”.

I understand this to mean that we are to take all of those tapes or recordings that play in our minds over and over and allow them to be tested, evaluated, and changed by God. It’s easy for us to get caught in familiar play-back loops. We hear something and we play back what someone has told us, and we find ourselves stuck in a place that doesn’t allow for renewing, growing or transforming.

Eugene Peterson in “The Message” puts it this way: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It's not easy to take those voices that keep playing in our minds and make them stop or change or go away, but it is possible. It is possible when we listen to God's voice and use God's voice to test the other voices that clamor for our attention. I don't believe that God wants or expects us to surround ourselves with people who will always affirm what we say, or always tell us that we did well. But I also do not believe that God wants us to be surrounded by voices that are being hurtful or tearing us down.

As we practice and become better at listening to God's voice, we can start to recognize the hurtful and tearing down voices, or the ones that can offer insights that we cannot see on our own, suggestions about how we might do something differently, or something that we might have missed.

Paul goes on to talk about how we all have different gifts, and we should not think ourselves better or worse than another because our gifts are different. He uses the image of the body having many parts and together we make one well-functioning body. That's one reason why we need each other, and we need to listen to God and learn to test out those other voices.

There are people who have taken me aside and gently told me about ways that I have said something that hurt them or did something that offended them. When they have assumed that I did not intend to hurt them, it is easier to hear what they are saying and I am grateful that they have brought the behavior to my attention and given me an opportunity to learn from it and to change and do better.

On the other hand, someone yelling about how I am always inconsiderate or someone trying to bully me into a behavior by telling me that if I loved them or cared about them then I would fill in the blank, are not as likely to get my open-hearted attention. I can either feel crushed by their words, or increasingly I am more likely to wonder what has caused that individual to feel the need to disparage or cut-down another person.

As we continue to grow in listening to God, and learning how to test the outside voices against God's will, we become better at knowing ourselves, and finding our own voices. As we do this, we become better able to let go of the voices of the world that would tear us down and listen to the voices that are sincerely offering something that might be helpful for our own growth and learning.

At the beginning of the service, I said that we have a “cast of characters” inside our heads that love to carry on endless conversations – each from their own perspective. The chatter in our minds can sometimes keep us from deeper listening and it is often difficult to understand a deeper connection to God. Getting our True Self into the chairperson’s seat in the committee meeting does not mean ignoring those voices of fear, pessimism, people-pleasing or accusation, but instead listening intently to them and not letting them bully us into negative action. Letting them in and letting them go is the prayer of finding our own voice and letting go of the voices of the world.

We ask God to help us listen to those voices to see if they have anything to say that we need to hear. If they do, then we ask God to help us take action, or change what we need to change, so that we might be more in line with God’s will for us. If they do not have anything to say that we need to hear, then we let go of them, instead of carrying them around inside us. We let go of the voices that are not helpful and listen only to God’s voice that will help us find our own voice, a reflection of God’s.

Let us pray:

O God, help us to listen to you. Help us to be open to your word to us, so that we may better find our own voice, the voice that you want us to have, the voice that speaks love, compassion, mercy, and grace. Help us to know when to listen to the voices of the world and when to let them go. Amen.

ⁱ Fulbright, Pat H. Falling Apart & Other Fallacies p.1 Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Peterson, Eugene The Message Romans 12:1-2