

Trinity United Methodist Church

June 21, 2020

“Do You Hear What I Hear?”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Welcome

Good morning! It's a joy to worship with you.

Responsive Greeting

L: Welcome! This is a time to celebrate and worship God who loves us!

C: We are grateful and thankful for all God's blessings in our lives.

L: We gather to remember that Christ gave his life for us.

C: We humbly praise God for such a gift!

L: Come, friends! Come and worship the God of love and hope.

P: Praise be to God at all times and in all places! Amen.

Prayer

Let us go to God in prayer this morning. God, indeed, what a joy and privilege it is to come back together in worship before you in your house, in this your church. But help us always to remember, as we have realized during this time, that church is not just a building in which we gather, but that church is wherever we are as your people, as individuals and families and friends, together in faith in you. That worship is not just something that we do on Sunday mornings, whether virtually or in person, but worship is indeed a part of who we are as believers, that worship is a lifestyle, and that we should be able to worship through everything that we do. As Paul says, “whatever we do, to do it for You, Lord Jesus.”

So as we come in worship together today, it is a privilege to bow before you in prayer again. Forgive us for those times in which prayer becomes more of a laundry list that we present to you, in which we exasperatingly list out all of our petitions to you and then call it a day. Help us to remember that you speak to us in many wonderful ways, and especially in prayer. God, help us to create the time to sit with silence, though it can be very uncomfortable, to find that time to listen for your still, small voice.

Even so, Lord, as we come and worship today, we come with many on our hearts and minds, joys and concerns. We pray for those who continue to grieve the loss of loved ones. We pray for those facing surgeries and recovering from surgeries, and we pray for those who continue their battle with cancer and other illnesses. Hear us as we lift to you those individuals and situations that are on our hearts and minds, aloud and in our hearts at this time.

Hear us, oh Lord, as we pray these things and more in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 10:24-39 (NIV)

24 “The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! 26 So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. 32 Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. 33 But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. 34 Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—36 a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’ 37 Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”

Sermon

Isn't that a lovely reading for Father's Day?

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So also, happy Father's Day to all of the dads out there—Happy Father's Day, Dad. Glad y'all could be here. In honor of Father's Day, I asked Chloe, in all the traveling back and forth to Mathews County this week, to help me find some good dad jokes to share this morning. One of my favorites that I already knew—the last wedding that we went to was such an emotional time. It was so emotional that even the cake was in tiers. One of my favorites that Chloe found: Did you know that it takes *guts* to be an organ donor? I had a dream that I was a muffler last night, and boy, did I wake up exhausted this morning. And one of my favorites from my good friend, who is the king of dad jokes: What's the difference between Dubai and Abu Dhabi? The people in Dubai don't like the Flintstones, but the people in *Abu Dhabi do*.

Have you stopped listening yet?

Last week in our lectionary reading and sermon, I invited us to think about how we're seen, how we see each other, how we see ourselves, how we see the very complex situations going on around us. How are we doing at seeing beyond just the tip of the iceberg that we can easily see on the surface? How are we doing at seeing what lies beneath the surface of ourselves, of each other, of people we don't know and people in our country, especially right now and around the world? And most importantly, how are we doing at seeing how God sees?

But the question for this week is, how are we doing at listening? How are we doing at *listening*? Are we listening to more than just our favorite talking heads, whether they be on Fox News or CNN or somewhere in between?

One of the biggest and best features of Facebook is the "Unfollow" option. Have you done that? Have you got friends that all they do is post political stuff after political stuff after political stuff, and you get tired of seeing it? That "unfollow" feature—you might have to dig for a little bit—it's better than "unfriending" them, because if you "unfriend" them, eventually they figure out you "unfriended" them, and then, "why did you unfriend me?" Right? But if you just "unfollow" them, they don't know that you have unfollowed them. You're still friends on Facebook and they can continue to post their political stuff and you can go on and look at pictures of each other's cute puppies and what you had for lunch and whatever else you like to see.

But the danger of social media is, the more that we do that, the more that we create for ourselves an echo chamber in which we interact with and we read and we listen to the voices that *we already agree with*. And that can be dangerous.

How are we doing at listening beneath the surface? Beneath the things that we hear to what's really going on underneath? We should have a sonar of sorts.

In the first part of the text for today, Jesus gives us the most oft-repeated command in all of scripture. What is it? "Do not be afraid." You might have heard it said that it is repeated 365 times throughout the Bible, one for each day of the year. That's a lovely sentiment, but it isn't entirely accurate. But it is a lovely sentiment, to be reminded daily to not be afraid, for we have no reason to fear as followers of Jesus. Jesus repeats this two or three times at least in today's reading. "Don't be afraid."

A good part of inducing fear in someone else or in ourselves is planting ideas in the mind through words, through what we speak, through what others hear, right? It happens every election year, no matter who is up for election. All of the ads are, "Don't vote for so-and-so. Don't vote for *them* because of the fear of what's going to happen if *they* wind up in charge," right? It happens every single election cycle.

I remember a seminary professor who had gotten to the Ashland area for a workshop the night before. He had a camping trip coming up and he needed a sleeping bag, so he went to that huge Bass Pro Shop there in Ashland, right off the interstate. And as he was paying for the sleeping bag, he said that the cashier tried to sell him on the warranty for it. He politely declined it and she said, "But you don't know what might happen to this sleeping bag, if it gets torn or if the zipper breaks, you could bring it back." He said, "It won't cost all that much. I really don't need the warranty." She was obviously trained to upsell him, but she was trying to sell him based on fear of what might happen to this product that he was trying to buy.

Fear is a big part of what we hear out there. But who are we listening to?

Jesus point-blank says, "What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight. What is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs." It coincides with his teaching on prayer earlier in Matthew's gospel in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says, "Don't be like the hypocrites, who pray loud enough for everybody else to hear." Not even like the Pharisees standing on the corner and doing that—the houses in those days didn't have glass in the windows, so if you were praying in the frontmost room in your house, the one closest to the street, and you were praying out loud, anybody walking by could hear your pious prayers to God. Jesus said, "Don't even do that. Go into the innermost room in your house. Go into your closet, where it's dark, and there pray to your Father in secret." Here he says, "What I tell you in the dark, in those interior places, speak in the daylight."

It's coinciding with prayer, and it reminds us that really growing in prayer means that we should be doing more listening than we do talking. Many times when I pray it turns into sort of that laundry list. "I pray for so-and-so, and pray for so-and-so, and pray for this, and pray for that, and Lord, help me with this, and help me with that, and etc., etc. Thank you for this. Thank you for that." We get through our list, and then we go, "All right, thanks, God, love you, catch you later. Amen." Well, maybe God might actually want to say something to *us* in prayer as well. But that takes work, to do more listening than we do talking.

You might say, "Ha—that's a good word coming from you, Pastor—you're just up there, talking, talking, talking." Every pastor in the United Methodist Church has to go through some sort of chaplaincy training for a variety of reasons. Usually it takes place in a hospital setting, and I did mine in a mental hospital. Let me tell you, that prepared me to work with some of y'all so well. I'm just so appreciative of that experience.

But this process teaches you to do a lot more listening than you do talking, and especially in a mental hospital. You hear all kinds of things coming out of people's mouths. One guy told me, "Tell Michael Jackson hello next time you see him." I said, "Will do!" And so forth. On one of my last days there, a guy had paged for a chaplain, so I went to his room. He was lying in his bed and said, "I have a problem," so I said, "What's your problem?" Due to confidentiality, I won't share what the problem was, but let's just say, my first gut reaction, the words that I wanted to say were, "Yeah. That's a problem," and launch into sort of how he might take care of that. But despite every part of my nature wanting to spout with words back at him, I crouched down, got on his eye level, and said, "What's that like?" And this voice in my head said, "I made it! I'm doing more listening than I am talking!" Because it really, really takes work. Those moments where we don't know what to say, but we feel like we have to say *something*, so we say something so stupid most of the time, that really isn't helpful.

You see, listening more than speaking involves trust. How many times have you been in a conversation with somebody, particularly a difficult conversation, particularly one where they are spouting off at you and they are hurling all the words at you, at your character and so forth, and you want to spout back with all the words? You want to justify yourself. You want to defend yourself. In the words of Dr. Phil, how's that working for you? To just listen can often be more helpful, because most of the time, that person just needs a safe place to vent. So, to listen involves trust. That you don't need to get out every single word that's popping into your head, because the One who matters most already knows it to begin with.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Jesus asks. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows."

But then Jesus makes this turn. And it's a turn that I don't like; I don't know about you. Now, first of all, I have to get something off my chest here. Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." Friends, let me say, this is **not** about sharing on Facebook the post that is supposedly a picture of Jesus that says, "If you share this picture, Jesus will be with you. But if you don't share this picture of Jesus, you're denying Christ, and you're an apostate and not in the faith, etc., etc." Friends, first of all, most of the time that picture isn't even of Jesus. It's Obi-Wan Kenobi from Star Wars. Okay? And that's *not* what this is about. It's taking the verse out of context. And besides, I'm not sharing that mess to begin with, anyway. It's a guarantee to be scrolled on, right?

It's about listening to Jesus. It's about following Him ever more closely, especially during times like these. We need peace, don't we? Lord knows we need peace. This is where Jesus is hard to hear, because he point-blank says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." He's come to deliberately turn family members against each other. "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." And friends: I love you, Dad, but even you know, I'm a big old Mama's boy.

On the surface, Jesus sounds really harsh. But remember his overall mission. His overall mission is to bring the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven. A kingdom that will always compete with the kingdoms of this earth that have ever been or ever will be. And we know from history that the only way that earthly kingdoms give up or are removed is by force. And Jesus is clear, he intends to use force—but spiritual force, that in our hearts can feel as violent as literally turning a sword against even our own family, much less our own people. Our political party, our national identity, our preferred talking heads.

I can't tell you how many times in my own walk with Jesus, as I continue to learn more about following Jesus, I go, "But wait a minute. I've always identified with this particular group, or that particular group. And where I'm feeling called to follow Jesus now, that doesn't fit in with either of them." And those people get mad sometimes, when you're breaking away from their group. But friends, who are we listening to? And do you hear what I hear? Do you hear *who* I hear?

Again, thank you for your prayers for my mother-in-law and our family. The pastor shared yesterday that when Brenda was first diagnosed five years ago, the doctors didn't give her long at all, gave her maybe a year. And she shared then—she said, "If I live, of course that's great. But if I die, well, that's okay, too. Because I know who I'll be with, where I'm going." And friends, that can sound really harsh, especially to family members who don't believe, who are left behind. But I imagine, and I saw this on her face in her last days, where she was basically saying, "Don't listen to me. As much as

you love me, don't listen to me. Listen to the One who is calling me home, into the full presence of God."

Friends, there is no shortage of voices out there competing for our attention. And they might sound worse than it ever has, to some. But it really isn't. It's the same voices we've heard over and over again, of pride, arrogance, ignorance, prejudice, hate, fear, and more. Not to mention the voices that we still hear internally of self-doubt, of low self-worth, and more. But do you hear who I hear, who is hard to hear sometimes amongst the world's great demonic chorus, but who is so worth the work and the fight to hear? The One who says, through it all, *"Do not be afraid. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."* Do you hear Him? Thanks be to God. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray once more. God, when your servant Elijah was tired and weary and running for his life, you came and you ministered to him and you set him on the mountainside to listen for you. The ground shook and the rocks split in two, but your voice was not found in that. The violent, mighty rushing wind came through, and your voice was not found in that. And then there was silence, and in the silence, Elijah heard your still, small voice. Give us the grace to listen for you. In the name of Christ, amen.

Go in peace. May the God of love always be with us as we do our utmost to listen to Him always. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.