

11th July 2021 – ‘Listening to each other’

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC Little Voice, Sara Bareilles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiCtGoYowTA>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to you all this morning, however you are with us today, whatever you bring with you, you are welcome.

Parker J Palmer said: *If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants to be seen and heard.*

So, continuing the theme of ‘story’, this service is about listening to each other.

Let's begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle.

If you're at home do light a candle with me if you would like to.

Here, today, in this place and with these people,

May we listen so that we can hear;

May we hear so that we can feel;

May we feel so that we can know; and

May we know so that we can change ourselves and this world.

May this chalice we light,

Light our Way.

Amen

2nd hymn: 11 (P) Blessed spirit of my life

Blessed spirit of my life,

give me strength through stress and strife;

help me live with dignity;

let me know serenity.

Fill me with a vision,

clear my mind of fear and confusion.
When my thoughts flow restlessly,
let peace find a home in me.

Spirit of great mystery,
hear the still, small voice in me.
Help me live my wordless creed
as I comfort those in need.
Fill me with compassion;
be the source of my intuition.
Then when life is done for me,
let love be my legacy.

Words and music by Shelley Jackson Denham

PRAYER Listening with the heart, Gary Kowalski
Maybe prayer doesn't mean talking to God at all.
Maybe it means just listening.

Unplugging the TV, turning off the computer,
Quieting the mental chatter and distractions.
Maybe it means listening to the birds
And the insects, the wind in the leaves, the creaking and groaning of the trees,
noticing
Who else is out there, not far away but nearby;
Sitting so still we can hear our heartbeat,
Watch our breath, the gentle whoosh of air,
The funny noises from our own insides,
Marveling at the body we take so much for granted.

Maybe it means listening to our dreams,
Paying more attention to what we really want from life,
And less attention to all the nagging, scolding voices from our past.

Or maybe it's all about listening to each other,
Not thinking ahead to how we can answer or rebut or parry or advise or admonish,
But actually being present to each other.

Perhaps if we just sit quietly we'll overhear a peace whispering through the centuries
That's missing from the clamour of the moment.
Maybe prayer means listening to the silences between the words,
Noticing the negativity of space,
The vast, undifferentiated and nameless wonder
That underlies it all.

Maybe prayer doesn't mean talking to God at all,
But listening with the heart,
To the angel choirs all around us.

Those who have ears,
Let them hear.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes: *'I expect the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention...When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them.'*

I invite you now simply to listen as Suzanne shares something of her story with us this morning. Her words will be followed by silence and then music.

STORY: Suzanne's story

Prejudice refers to a positive or negative evaluation of another person based on their perceived group membership eg: race class gender religion sexual orientation and ability. How come in the year 2021 we still have the word prejudice in our dictionaries, because there is still plenty of it about even though all those years ago throughout the ministry of Jesus we learned that prejudice towards others was not acceptable, to not accept people how they are or how they see themselves is to demean their human rights and of course does nothing for the perpetrators, save show their ignorance.

People's ignorance of others has a lasting and damaging effect on those who are the recipients. It can diversify the very path in life that a person takes. There are many stories in people's lives that can testify to that and my story of prejudice experiences happened throughout my life starting when I was 15yrs old. I stayed out innocently all night with a friend who happened to be the same sex as myself and when I went home my parents were waiting for me and my father used me as a boxers punch bag. I never knew why until at 17 years I signed up in the WRAC. And three months before my demob time I was discharged for being gay.

As a civilian I got tired of the preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience that was interrupting with the person of who I am, so I decided to live a life that professedly was a normal one. I wanted to have a child anyway. O dear wrong move. I married or thought I was and walked right into a world that I never knew existed, which was the underworld of Plymouth. There was nothing in my upbringing that prepared me for this. I had three daughters: in 1960 Denise, 1962 Jacqueline, and 1963 came Pauline.

I realised that I was being used and had to find a way out so went to the social services in Plymouth. They said the difficulty I was having was a social class difference and was no help at all, but I had Pauline with me and no money or home. They said they would foster-parent Pauline while I sorted out work and a place to live. The other two children should remain where they were in their father's mother's home. I eventually found work on a farm on Dartmoor and rented a cottage in the village with the idea of Pauline living with me first, followed by Jacqueline and Denise. I found out that Pauline had been taken to Hull without informing me so that night I drove to Hull social services office and demanded to see my daughter. Eventually they agreed but the short meeting ended up with the social service woman pulling a 4-year-old child out of her mother's arms. I can't say how long I cried but it was endless. Time went on with me not understanding why I was not receiving the support that I was entitled to, then it clicked the same prejudice was happening, as by now I was living with a woman and running out of hope and sometimes love means to let go.

I am one of the thousands of woman waiting for an apology from the government because of prejudices against them being gay or a single mum or poor or a different colour etc. To me it is 'children stolen under a legitimate umbrella'.

In 2021 the pandemic has enabled us to focus and be aware of nature's value to our very existence, surely being kinder to each other by realising the vast diversity in nature and how valuable to us it is, then perhaps by being kinder to our fellow humans. We shall then eradicate our prejudices of each other and instead we could calibrate our differences. For we were all born under the same stars.

REFLECTION

Silence

INTERLUDE 'Listening', by Lea

<https://youtu.be/1JMf0JbCQ5k>

ADDRESS

Listening is a practice. It's something that we can get better at the more we do it. Listening is about letting our busy-brained selves move aside, just for a while, in order to make space for something else. That 'something else' might be nature: the sound of a song thrush singing, or wind rushing through the trees, or rain splashing on the pavement. When we listen to the rhythms of nature we find they mirror and merge with the rhythms of our own bodies. Our breathing and heartbeat ebb and flow like the tides and the seasons. And so we are able to feel more connected with the planet and its cycles.

Or perhaps we make space for our own soul's 'little voice' to be heard. What is that small voice trying to say to us? There is such wisdom to be heard from the spirit within, if we're willing listen to it. Or, as we have been doing this morning, we choose to clear away enough debris to make room for someone else's story, which means putting aside our own stories for a time while we walk alongside another human being.

Truly listening means allowing ourselves to drop in to a place of quietness and stillness. You might think of being in a state of readiness and receptivity, alert and focused. Listening like this allows a deeper quality of understanding to emerge, one that's more compassionate and connected. Listening to each other's stories, with our hearts fully open, really is a form of prayer. It is a way of consciously acknowledging and honouring the humanity as well as the divinity of another being.

Hearing each other's stories can happen anywhere: on the bus, in the supermarket, in the pub, over a coffee, in church. But it always requires us to lay down our prejudices and assumptions, and to clear away the clutter of our minds. It needs us to hold the person we're listening to in the light of clear space, rather than jumping in with our judgments, and our interpretations, or with another story of our own. It means expanding our small selves in order to make room for another. Listening in this way is an act of love, which we can extend to those we know, as well as to complete strangers.

Suzanne has shared what happened to her and her daughters when the people who should have been listening to her made judgments about her instead. The results, as we've heard, were devastating. I know Suzanne is still waiting and hoping that she will one day be reunited with her youngest daughter, Pauline.

Sadly these kinds of things still happen, in small and enormous ways.

The American sculptor Anne Truitt wrote: 'Unless we are very careful, we doom each other by holding onto images of one another based on preconceptions that are in turn based on indifference to what is other than ourselves. This indifference can be, in its extreme, a form of murder and seems to me a rather common phenomenon. We claim autonomy for ourselves and forget that in so doing we can fall into the tyranny of defining other people as we would like them to be. By focusing on what we choose to acknowledge in them, we impose an insidious control on them. I notice [she continues] that I have to pay careful attention in order to listen to others with an openness that allows them to be as they are, or as they think themselves to be. The shutters of my mind habitually flip open and click shut, and these little snaps form into patterns I arrange for myself. The opposite of this inattention is love, is the honoring of others in a way that grants them the grace of their own autonomy and allows mutual discovery.'

I've been thinking about listening in another context, as the orchestra I play in has begun meeting for rehearsals again. Our conductor Anne usually leads from the front with her conductor's baton, as you would expect. But recently she's started to come down from her podium more often and sit to one side while we play. Which of course means that suddenly we have no one to watch or rely on, and must instead listen intently to each other. The difference is remarkable. We play more intuitively, better in time and better in tune, more aware of each other's sound and movement. Because we are listening we begin to play

more as one. We each have to discover for ourselves our place in the whole sound, when to play out and when to fall away again when it's another section's moment to shine. The experience is more intimate, and more rewarding. We still need our conductor to organize us and guide us, of course. But when we really listen to each other, we hear things we've never heard before, and begin to understand better how our different parts support and complement each other. When we see another's purpose more clearly, we also better see the importance of our own.

Listening is work. It requires concentration. But it opens the door to wholeness.

I'd like to finish with these words by Mark Nepo.

*'For listening to the stories of others...is a kind of water that breaks the fever of our isolation
If we listen closely enough, we are soothed into remembering our common name.'*

May it be so.

HYMN 33 (green) Do you hear?

Do you hear, O my friend, in the place where you stand,
Through the sky, though the land, do you hear, do you hear,
In the heights, on the plain, in the vale, on the main,
In the sun, in the rain, do you hear, do you hear?

Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush,
Do you hear in the hush of your soul, of your soul,
Hear the cry fear won't still, hear the heart's call to will,
Hear a sigh's startling trill, in your soul, in your soul?

From the place where you stand, to the outermost strand,
Do you hear, O my friend, do you hear, do you hear,
All the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers –
They are yours, mine, and theirs: do you hear, do you hear?

William Caldwell's 'Union Harmony', words by Emily Lenore Luch Thorn

CLOSING WORDS Rev Leslie Takahashi

Walk the maze

within your heart: guide your steps into its questioning curves.

This labyrinth is a puzzle leading you deeper into your own truths.

Listen in the twists and turns.

Listen in the openness within all searching.

Listen: a wisdom within you calls to a wisdom beyond you and in that dialogue lies peace.

And good luck to England tonight.

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC 'Who knows where the time goes?', Sandy Denny (chosen by Suzanne)

<https://youtu.be/jsqztvHIB9Y>

I'll be away