

“Listening Well”

July 17, 2016

Starting Over, Digging Deeper series

Starting over and digging deeper is an exercise in remembering who we are and whose we are. It’s a focus on the truth that God’s creation starts with goodness and grace and that God wants to be in relationship with us so much that God comes in Jesus. God sets up camp with us. God sets us free to love and serve. God calls us to see one another as God sees us - as neighbors to love, not objects to use. That’s where we’ve been so far.

Today we focus on the importance of listening - and listening well for God’s voice. Kenny Chesney’s song “Noise” spoke truth when I heard it on the radio. We are barraged by noise. Sometimes we’re overwhelmed. Sometimes we just get louder. But I wonder, even though I agree with Chesney 100% about the noise in our world, can I really take the silence?

Am I willing to be silent so that I might truly listen to God? (Did you notice that silent and listen are made up of the same letters, but just in a different order?) How many of us set aside intentional time to be silent so that we might listen to God? I’ll confess, I’m not so good at it. I’m tempted to fill up the silence with something - background music or TV. Silence is golden, they say, but it’s not easy to embrace.

A couple of years ago, National Geographic highlighted a town called Green Bank, WV. Green Bank is home to the world’s largest fully steerable radio telescope called the Green Bank Telescope - GBT for short. It stands 485 feet above ground level, weighs 17 million pounds, and its surface is larger than a football field. It’s extremely sensitive to radio waves from space, and because it picks up those waves so well, any other electromagnetic waves can mess with its data. The GBT can detect the minimal energy level equivalent to a single snowflake falling.

So it’s not surprising that the National Radio Quiet Zone surrounds the GBT, which means that you can’t use cell phones or mobile devices. You can’t have a microwave. You can’t have anything that will interfere with the ability of this amazing telescope to pick up radio waves.

Many who live there are content with life without things that we use every day. But I can’t imagine life without those devices that we count on to make life easier and more convenient. I don’t know if I could take the silence. I don’t know if I’d be willing to listen long enough.

Jefferson Bethke says, “Silence is the eerie monster that a lot of us try to avoid. We run from silence because we’re scared of its power. Silence can make us face our

true selves. It's when we begin to ask the deep questions." And he adds, "When we cut out silence, we cut out the margin for God to speak."

Elijah the prophet had a powerful experience with God speaking - not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in the gentle breeze. Some translations say that God spoke in a gentle whisper. My favorite translation calls it a "still, small voice." As he's on the run, Elijah has an encounter with the living God who calls Elijah back to faith and trust. And God does it in a still, small voice - certainly not what Elijah expected from all-powerful God.

Mother Teresa is credited with saying, "We need to find God, and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within - words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness."

Her words are challenging as I consider how I fill up silence or how I can become distracted. There are many times when my kids want my attention, and I'm writing a message or sending a text or making a call. How much more is God trying to get me to pay attention? How am I missing God? One of our quotes said that for most of us, being heard and being loved are the same thing. If we believe that part of being loved is being heard, what are you and I telling one another when we don't listen?

Listening fully is a part of Jesus' baptism story. Jesus believes God when God speaks. Bethke says, "Jesus didn't hear 'This is my employee' at his baptism; Jesus heard 'This is my son, the one I love. He makes me happy.'" And Jesus believes that affirmation even as he goes from that high moment of blessing into the wilderness where the Tempter comes and tries to make him believe that what God said isn't true.

So much of our struggle is to believe God's blessing on us - perhaps even to believe that God knows us and cares about us. In baptism we step into the future claiming that we belong to God and that we identify with Jesus in his death and resurrection. When we think about God calling us "beloved" son or daughter, when we claim that for ourselves, then we're stepping into what God says is true about us.

When Jesus is baptized, he identifies with you and me. One of our stories at VBS this week was the baptism of Jesus. Our theme that night was "God loves." (Amazing!) Not only was God saying how much he loved Jesus, but he was also reminding us that we are loved. We are God's children, and Jesus comes to show us God's abiding love.

And notice that God calls Jesus "beloved" right away. The same is true for us. We're loved - not after we've done enough or lived long enough or tried hard enough - but at the very beginning. Even before we claim God's love for ourselves, it's there. We

don't have to try to get God to love us. God already does, and we respond to God's love by loving and serving in God's name.

The waters of baptism are powerful. Bethke reminded me of the power of water. It can get through every crack very easily. And that's how God's love works, too. God can get to us - when there's that slightest opening, that smallest window, that tiniest bit of willingness to believe that we are God's beloved.

Friends, as we encountered kids at VBS this week, my prayer was that they knew without a doubt that God loves them. I hope we heard God saying it to us, too. We met kids who had little exposure to God or church, but who were hungry to learn.

As our mission team encounters new people in a new place, I hope that they share the love of God with others. I pray that they experience God in a new and powerful way, too - taking time away from the noise of their lives to serve and grow in Christ.

Some of you served at Supper House over the past two weeks, how did you experience God speaking to you when you poured a cup of coffee or milk - when you greeted someone or invited them to enjoy their meal?

One night this week, we had a conversation with a teen who stopped because we're a Poké Stop for Pokémon Go. And he wasn't the only one. Our attitudes and welcome matter whenever we have an opportunity to meet someone - whether they come here for a church program or because they're playing a game. I pray that the sign that reads "Welcoming All" rings true.

Starting over and digging deeper means that we're seeking to live our faith in a more authentic way. Looking around and seeing new opportunities to live out God's call on our lives - a call that begins with each named and claimed by God - is vital to our faith.

Getting past the noise of our lives is a start. Setting time aside in silence - maybe starting with a few minutes - can get us to a place where we're paying closer attention to God. It will take intentional work on my part and your part. So I'm starting with 5 minutes where I seek to focus on God's still, small voice. I commit to that today and invite you to do what will work for you.

May we listen well so that we will remember who we are - beloved of God - and who God is - the one who loves us and calls us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.