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# LISTEN TO LOVE

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*Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40*



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A wise communications professor brought a photograph to class one day for an exercise in observation. It was a simple black & white photo of an elderly man sitting on some front steps. To his right, stood a young woman, looking down toward him, and in front of him, stood a child, facing both the old man and the woman.

The professor then asked the class to tell her what they thought was going on in the picture. One student suggested that the child and the woman were somehow caring for the old man.

Another student said, "The child is listening to a story while the mother watches."

"Maybe they're just passing the time waiting for someone to come out of the building," was another guess. And all sorts of plausible stories came up until the professor finally explained what was really happening in the photograph.

"The elderly man and the young woman are listening to the child telling them something. All the signs are there: the way the young woman is fondly looking down toward not just the old man, but specifically at the child. The man is watching the child intently. Notice the child's hands? They're spread out away from the body and the body is leaning toward the two adults, like the child is emphasizing something; and there's a big smile on their faces."

"Communication is happening all the time," she concluded, "we just have to pay attention to the signs. We must be watchful and alert like Sherlock Holmes, noticing things that we normally gloss over in life."

The Christian life isn't much different as we strive to nurture and cultivate the Kingdom of God. We are communicating our faith in our actions (showing just where our treasure really is) and at the same time, we're watching for where God is (like servants waiting for the master to return home from the banquet). And we have to ask ourselves, "Are we really being intentional about either one?"

Like the professor in the story said, we're communicating all the time. The question is, as followers of Christ, "What are we saying?" Just what are we communicating when we're not doing it intentionally? Whether or not we think anyone's listening, they are; not to mention that God hears us, and that's the most important gauge of all.

A prophet's job is to communicate the word of God to the people or to the king to whom he is under contract. In our reading today from the book of Isaiah, the prophet conveys God's message to Judah and Jerusalem – a call to repentance. Not one of those “I'm sorry, I didn't mean it,” repentances but a real one – a repentance where people change.

God has been watching their communication -- the messages they've been sending through their actions – their patterns of living. They've been giving lip service through their prayers, sacrifices that aren't all that sacrificial, festivals that hold little meaning to the heart. Here God sees a people who are glossing over the work of the soul, and the effects have clearly been detrimental to their society and their community. They commit acts of evil. They don't strive for justice. And the most marginalized people in Israelite society – the widows and the orphans – have been abandoned. But I don't think God is angry in this passage, like many commentators – I think God is sad. I think God's desperately trying to get their attention.

Have things changed so little in almost 3,000 years? In our modern society, we can still hear God weeping -- crying out through the oppressed, through the orphans whose parents were killed by the evil of gun violence, through the refugee widows of wars in foreign lands, and through the sacred places that have been violated by someone else's judgment. The signs are all there and God is still calling to us – crying out, “Look! Watch!” Begging us to be ready to do our part.

Are we listening? Are we willing? Do we have the depth of faith, as that old Franciscan blessing says, to be foolish enough to believe that we really can make a difference in this world? These are hard questions, and so are the answers.

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker that says, “Jesus is coming. Look busy!” It's funny. But it's a tad bit heretical. You see, it sort of points to the belief that as long as we're being *nice*, doing *nice* things, then we're good Christians, or more accurately, *nice* Christians. It'd be a good start for some, to be sure, but to be a follower of Jesus – a disciple – requires more.

A transformed life means that you can't go back to just being 'nice'. A transformed life implies that the church has a deeper mission than clubs and humanitarian groups. Which are good things, certainly, but that's not the reason why the Christian church exists.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during WWII once said, “The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members.” How about that? We exist to benefit non-members – the people who are not us.

According to our UM Book of Discipline, in the preamble to the Social Principals on page 104, “We stand united in declaring our faith that God's grace is available to all, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” This assurance gives us the faith to share this promise with those who are outside our walls – those who are the reason we exist. Our baptismal covenant, our confirmation and new members’ vows reinforce this as it asks us to “renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of [y]our sin.”

We are charged with proclaiming, by word and by example, the Good News of Jesus Christ, to seek and to serve Christ in all persons, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. It’s a tall order isn’t it? Thank God we don’t have to do it alone! We have God and we have each other – our community, our family.

You may wonder how we can join in God’s work outside the church walls when we feel like we’re already doing so much within. Maybe looking outside is overwhelming and we don’t know where to begin. And most of all, it’s hard sometimes to find or interpret the messages that we are receiving.

In his book *Seek God Everywhere*, Indian psychotherapist and Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello writes:

*In all actions, in all conversations, Ignatius [of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus] felt the presence of God and contemplated the presence of God. He enjoyed that mysterious gift of seeing God. So we are entitled to be called contemplatives in action if in all things and all actions we feel the presence of God and contemplate the presence of God. We can see that this is not the same as doing the will of God in everything.*

To find God, to see God in all things, or to be a ‘contemplative in action’ means much more than doing God’s will in all things. To feel and contemplate the presence of God is the experience of devotion, peace, quiet, consolation. How can we achieve this grace of finding God in everything? In everything I’ve read there’s always one key word: solely, or only, or entirely... That’s the key word. Doing it ‘only, entirely, solely’ for God.

When we get quiet, when we become still, we can then finally listen to god -- then, and only then. When we can hear the faint crunch of the master's sandals on the path, then we can begin to light the lamps.

There's a children's book titled "The Listening Walk" by Paul Showers, in which a young girl enjoys taking walks with her father and their old dog, Major. Major doesn't walk very fast. "On a listening walk I do not talk," says the girl. "I listen to all the different sounds. I hear many different sounds when I do not talk."

At the end of the book she tells us, "You don't even have to take a walk to hear sounds. There are sounds everywhere all the time. All you have to do is keep still and listen to them."

As the Psalm says, "Be still, and know that I am God."

All we have to do is be still. Listen for and listen to God – listen to love. God will take care of the rest.

Amen