

Are We Listening?
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 25, 2014
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Texts: Acts 17.22-31;
Psalm 66.8-20;
1 Peter 3.13-22;
John 14.15-21

On Wednesday close to 800 people gathered on Hope's campus for a Summit on Race and Inclusion. A number of us who attended from Hope Church went to the session for the faith community and had the delight in being led by Rev. Alvin Herring. He began our session by teaching us a Zulu greeting. It is pronounced Sawubona! The root of the word means "I see you." That is a profound way to greet another person. It requires you to stop, to notice the human being in front of you and to acknowledge their existence and importance. The reply by the way is Sikona - "then I am here." We began this way because Rev. Herring was making the case that the only way we can heal the racism and the unconscious bias (what they were calling the implicit bias) we all hold is as we learn to really see each other and build genuine community between people.

The moment he shared this opening exercise with us, I recognized a connection to this passage from Acts for today. When Paul goes to Athens, he wanders around the city and he sees, I think genuinely sees, the people who live there. When stands before the Arepagus he essentially says "Sawubona" as he shares what he has seen and heard as he has lived among the people of Athens. He praises them for their religious interests and comments on the many altars and temples he has seen. He ends his sermon with a quote from one of their own poets: "For in God we live and move and have our being...for we too are God's offspring." This was from a pagan poet who wrote around 270 years before the birth of Christ.

There is no question that Paul's interest in Athens was to convert the people there. But I wonder if there was something more going on for Paul than just that. Remember that Paul is an educated man. He has read,

obviously, the Greek poets and philosophy. And I wonder if part of what he is doing is bringing together the things he had learned from his non-religious education into conversation with his faith. This is something we in the reformed tradition have always sought to do. So kids- - I want to say something directly to you. I know you are excited for school to be out for the year. But I want to encourage you to know that what you do there - what you learn in school - is helping you to grow in your faith because when you learn about God's world you are learning about God. OK? OK.

When Paul goes to Athens and he sees, genuinely sees the people who live there, what he discovers is that God was already there at work among them hundred if not thousands of years before Paul arrived to tell the story of Jesus Christ. When we meet people where they are and engage them in conversation around the things that matter most to them, there are opportunities to talk about the things of faith. People love to tell the stories of their life - what has happened to them and how it is that they view the world as a result. We have the opportunity to listen for God in people's stories and to share our own stories in a way that invites people to see God at work in us.

In fact, the central point of the session on faith that several of us attended at the Summit was essentially the power of narrative to shape how we see the world and therefore how we treat one another. Rev. Herring walked us through a number of provocative slides. They were pictures of different people in different situations. He invited us to name the narrative - the story - the dominant culture would share about the people in the slides. Then he invited us to deconstruct that narrative; to tear apart the stereotype to imagine the human beings in all of their unique complexity before us. He offered from his 20 years of experience doing this work that the most important contribution we can bring is to offer what he called a "counter narrative" or a "prophetic narrative" to challenge the story the dominant culture has been telling.

The beautiful thing about people of faith is that we don't have to dream up these "counter narratives." We have a treasure trove of powerful, transformative stories that we can turn to when we want to listen for where God might be moving among us. One of the central stories of our faith that

speaks to us of where God is active and alive when people are being pushed down or held back is the story Psalm 66 sings of today: the story of the exodus.

This passage from Psalm 66 is a window into the Hebrew soul as some among them try to make sense of the suffering they endured while slaves in Egypt. Clearly this psalm was written after they escaped from Egypt and made their way into the Promised Land. The most interesting part of the psalm in my estimation is verses 10-12 – “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net: you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water...”

I thought - is that really fair - to say God is the one who did all of that to them? Wasn't it the Egyptians who forced them into slavery for 400 years? Wasn't it the Pharaoh who refused to let them go? Actually, the way the Exodus story is told it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let them go. I know as modern, sophisticated people we know better than those ancients who seemed to think that God was the direct force behind each and every action. Frankly as we read these passages, I think many of us just sail right on past some of those more troubling aspects of the story.

I have found that it is interesting to let these stories stand on their own and just listen for God in the midst of them especially as we reflect on our lives together in light of these stories. I had a real insight into this passage when I had the opportunity to share in a Seder at the home of some dear friends. One of them is Christian and her partner is Jewish- they celebrate both Christian and Jewish holidays and I got a seat at their Seder table one year. When we got to the moment in the liturgy for the night where we remember the ten plagues visited upon Egypt one of the dinner guests shared his understanding of why God would harden Pharaoh's heart. I suspect his insight came from his own life experiences.

He said the Israelites had been slaves for hundreds of years. While they cried out for relief they were not yet ready for freedom. They couldn't quite envision something that gran because they had become accustomed

to their oppression. They needed the conviction that comes from fighting for your own liberation. When Moses first suggested they could leave they didn't believe him. They thought he was crazy. But each time he went to Pharaoh and demanded their release the people's hope grew just a little. And each time he refused they were disappointed. But with each disappointment their conviction that they deserved freedom grew so that when the time for their Exodus had come they marched right out of Egypt! On the other side of the Promised Land, they could see God at work making them ready for their freedom.

I ran across a prayer this week that I think captures how this story has spoken to so many people through the centuries who have tried to listen for God in their quest for freedom. But I share it with you because I think it speaks beyond this particular experience and has something to say to all of us about what the whole enterprise of faith is all about.

The prayer comes from a book called *The Faithful Gardener: A Wise Tale About That Which Can Never Die* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. It is called "A Prayer in the Time of Crisis."

"Refuse to fall down. If you cannot refuse to fall down, refuse to stay down. If you cannot refuse to stay down, lift your heart toward heaven, and like a hungry beggar, ask that it be filled, and it will be filled.

You may be pushed down. You may be kept from rising. But no one can keep you from lifting your heart toward heaven - only you.

It is in the midst of misery that so much becomes clear. The one who says nothing good came of this, is not yet listening."

We meet God in all kinds of places...in the writings of pagan poets, in the debates of the market place, in the struggle for justice, and even in the suffering that sometimes comes into our lives. The question for us in all of these places is: "Are we listening?"