

Message: “Listen for the Spirit’s Voice”

Picture a camp trail in the woods. A parent and their young child stand at the trailhead. The child is blindfolded. The parent gives them three simple rules for the hike ahead:

- *I will never leave you.*
- *You can ask me anything.*
- *Only listen for my voice.*

At first, walking together is easy. The child feels the parent’s hand in theirs. They hear footsteps right beside them. But soon, there’s a quiet signal for the parent to step back. They can no longer hold the child’s hand and must stay silent unless the child speaks to them.

Meanwhile, the woods grow noisy. Branches snap, the wind blows and distant campers shout. The child gets turned around. Without realizing it, they drift off the path and step into a shallow ditch, their blindfold tight and heart racing in the sudden confusion and silence.

What does the child do? Instead of panicking or trying to guess the way out, the child remembers rule #2: *You can ask me anything.*

Standing alone, they whisper into the void, “Are you there?”

Instantly, from just inches away, the parent replies, “Yeah, I’m here. Take my hand.”¹

We are constantly immersed in the noise of life. We wear blindfolds of stress, grief and confusion. The world clamors for our attention with competing demands, making the Spirit’s voice hard to detect.

This is when we can encounter the quiet presence of God.

Jesus hasn’t left us. God’s silence is often an invitation to lean in close and call out to the Spirit, rather than relying on our own senses.

When we listen, we hear an intimate whisper, from One who loves and cares for us. The Holy Spirit rarely shouts over our chaos. God waits for us to quiet our hearts, recognize our need and ask for guidance.

What a way to live life! When we experience the presence of God, we can do anything. Nothing is impossible.

¹ Google AI story, based on Joseph Prince

But there are also times when we're like a person standing by a river. On the opposite bank, a neighbor calls out, "How do I get to the other side of the river?" And we reply, "You ARE on the other side of the river!"

How often do our conversations mirror this twist in perspective?

We tend to assume the person across from us has the same perspective we do. We're bewildered when they suddenly voice their disagreement. The more we can come together realizing people have differences of thought, opinion and perspective, the more likely we'll be able to have enjoyable and meaningful conversations, and encounter God's Spirit through them.

Sadly, all too often, we don't listen. And it costs us dearly. To illustrate the high cost of poor listening, Diana Bonet, author of *The Business of Listening*, offers this example: A \$100,000 error was caused by a dispatcher who routed a fleet of drivers to deliver building materials. The dispatcher heard the city (Portland) but quit listening before they heard the state (Maine). The result: eight trucks, 3,000 miles away in Portland, Oregon.

Our third habit is listening for the Spirit's voice. This is about creating space, a space to pause and commune with God. For many people, listening to the Holy Spirit is like trying to hear a radio in a busy coffee shop. We can make out the voice, but strain over the clamor of the patrons to hear what they're saying.

This is the same situation when we try to listen for the Holy Spirit with too many people or things distracting us. We know the Holy Spirit is our companion and the source of our strength and wisdom. But we often let distractions drown out the voice of the Spirit. We know the Spirit is speaking, but we can't hear what they're saying.

How are we to know how to navigate our way through the world, eating with and blessing people, without the Spirit's voice to guide us? There's also a hard truth to admit: fear and laziness distract us.

Fear and laziness are killers. Fear of standing out, fear of causing offense, fear of tricky questions, fear of harsh words shuts us down, limiting our interaction with people.

The same with laziness. I don't mean the kind of laziness where we lie on the couch eating chips while watching our favorite program. I mean the inner voice prompting us not to bother reaching out to another person or not offering to serve our neighbors. Laziness tells us we don't have the time. Laziness whispers we need to take care of ourselves first.

Fear and laziness motivate us to come up with dozens of reasons about *who* we can't, or shouldn't, open ourselves to. Thankfully, the voice of the Holy Spirit helps us resist our worst impulses.

Michael Frost says, "My experience when engaging with my neighbors is opening my heart to the Holy Spirit. This helps separate truth from untruth, fiction from knowledge, the honorable from the dishonorable. Figuring out how best to be an intriguing, blessing, godly presence in the community isn't easy. If I'm going to encourage you to bless neighbors and eat with them, it'd be irresponsible of me not to encourage you to listen for the Spirit."²

But when it comes to opening our heart to the Holy Spirit, most people tend to do all the talking and don't allow time for a reply. We need to learn how to listen. We need to learn how to let the Holy Spirit do the prompting (talking). What we need to learn isn't found only in books but also in the Holy Spirit, who gives us the gift of knowledge to answer each other's questions and deal with the challenges they pose.

Now, for enthusiastic extroverts, the idea of blessing people and eating together sounds great, but the practice of solitude and silence, which is the habit of listening for the Spirit, is a big challenge. I appreciate this.

There are creative ways to listen for the Spirit's voice.

Prayer walking is a good example, and it can be done solo, with a partner or in a group. So can journaling, doodling and doing crafts, games or music, anything which gives us the chance to explore our faith and relationship with God.

Extroverts aren't the only ones dis-inclined to silence. The culture of many of our churches is shaped by the busy-ness and activism of our contemporary culture, which causes us to associate faith with "doing" things.

² Michael Frost, *Surprise the World*, NavPress, 2016, p. ??

Let's heed the warning of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Let the one who can't be alone beware of community. They'll only do harm to themselves and the community." If you find yourself unable to be alone, it means you need community. Needing community can lead to you using community to meet your needs. Please be careful.

Our practice of generosity and hospitality must be nurtured and sustained by the practices of silence and prayer. We need to learn to listen for the voice of God, as God shapes us and fills our hearts with love for those to whom God sends us.

Thomas Merton once remarked, "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers and sisters... Solitude and silence teach me to love them for what they are, not for what they say."³ Unless we can spend at least one significant period of time each week in the presence of God, we're in danger of appearing no different than anyone else to our frantic, stressed and busy friends and neighbors.

In Romans 8, Paul presents the stark difference between those who "*live according to [their] desires*" and those who "*have their minds set on what the Spirit desires*" (v5). Some people mistakenly interpret this in an overly dualistic way, seeing our material self as bad and only the spirit as good.

I believe Paul is talking about the worldview we can adopt.

If we're governed entirely by our appetites, our desires, we'll be driven in very unhelpful directions. When we allow the Spirit to guide us, we'll be free to enjoy our appetites in a helpful, godly manner.

Going back to our earlier example of eating and drinking, we find the Spirit prompting us to ensure we are a godly example, one arousing curiosity and interest in us and our faith. Carousing and gossiping like anyone else isn't all that interesting. Eating, drinking and blessing people in the way of the Spirit will be surprising to many.

Living a life of faith means negotiating the spectrum between being withdrawn and judgmental on the one hand and entering fully into a social setting that may be considered ungodly on the other. This is why learning to listen for the Spirit's voice is helpful and meaningful.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2

I don't think Jesus would be happy at either end of the spectrum.

And yet the “rules” associated with either end of the spectrum are much easier to figure out. We get what total withdrawal from social settings with those who are different looks like. And we know what it's like to spend social time solely with people like us.

It's easy to simply go with the flow and fit in socially with our neighbors and look no different to them. Total withdrawal and total capitulation both make sense. It's far trickier to work out the balance or the tension between withdrawal and engagement.

Trying to figure out how to be somewhere in the middle is tough.

It isn't easy to be a godly, intriguing, socially confident and joyous presence in the lives of people. And I don't think we're clever enough to find the balance on our own.

This is where the voice of the Spirit comes in. The Spirit's prompts help us adjust our stance. The Spirit prompts us when we drift too far to either end of the spectrum. In this way, the Spirit helps choreograph our lives in a way which promotes connection with our neighbors while also rousing curiosity about our faith. This is social holiness lived out.

And as we become more familiar with listening to the Spirit as a weekly rhythm, we'll find ourselves becoming more adept at hearing the Spirit in real time, during the trials of life and in encounters with our neighbors, as we bless or share a meal or engage with the people around us as we travel on the way Jesus shows us.

This is why listening for the Spirit helps us find joy in all we do.

And this sows seeds of faith.

Let us pray ...

Lord, it's true I need to learn how to be a better listener. Forgive me for the times I've inconvenienced others and messed up their plans because I didn't carefully listen. I recognize this is a flaw in my life. Starting today, I want to learn to become a caring listener. To do this, I'll have to break the habit of thinking about other things when people are trying to talk to me, focusing on them and their needs. So, I'm turning to You to help me silence my mind, listen to others, digest what they are saying, and become a better friend. I pray this in Jesus' name! Amen.

Group Practice

How did your blessings go this week? Who did you invite for a meal? We're taking a moment to learn and practice good, new habits together. This will help us improve our health, happiness and life.

Imagine this: you're cruising along, practicing good habits, when things just seem to go off track. You miss a day, then two. **When you slip, get back on track quickly.** This is our lesson for the week. As Kelly McGonigal says, "The best way to improve your self-control is to see how and why you lose control."

We make mistakes, commit errors and get off track just like everyone else. The difference is people with good habits get back on track as quickly as possible. Research has shown missing your habit once, no matter when it occurs, has no measurable impact on your long-term progress. Missing one day of brushing your teeth doesn't cause cavities.

So, rather than trying to be perfect, abandon your all-or-nothing mentality. You shouldn't expect to fail, but you should plan for failure. Take time to consider what will prevent your habit from happening.

What things are likely to get in your way? How can you work around them or bounce back quickly and get back on track? ***You need to be consistent, not perfect.*** Focus on being someone who infrequently misses a habit.

This week's practice: Bless 3 people. Eat with 3 more people this week. Spend time listening for the Spirit's voice.

Let's practice. Close your eyes or soften them. Take a couple of deep breaths. Imagine yourself in the presence of the Spirit. Enjoy it. [pause]

Center yourself with God. You may say a word like Abba, Amma, love, peace, let go, stillness, Jesus. Don't resist any thoughts. [pause]

When your thoughts start slowing down, pay attention, for the persistent ones are being shaped by the Spirit. [pause]

The Spirit may bring a person to mind who you can bless or eat with. Or some sin or encouragement. Or something left undone. Let this be oxygen to your soul. [pause] Open your eyes and return to this moment.

Let us pray...

Romans 8:5-6 (CEB)

People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace.

Matthew 6:1-6, 19-21 (CEB)

“Be careful that you don’t practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Whenever you give to the poor, don’t blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

When you pray, don’t be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.