

Homily Ash Wednesday
 February 6, 2008
 St. John's Episcopal Church
 The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

Listen

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:20-21

In the next forty days, I invite you to listen.

Listen, first of all, to the sound of your own heart beating within you.

Listen to your life. "Is the life I am living," asks the educator, Parker Palmer, "the life that wants to live in me?" "Ask me," writes the poet William Stafford, "if the life I am living is my life."¹

Listen to the people around you: those you love with all your heart and those whom you struggle to love. Listen, resisting the impulse to script your response as the other speaks. Listen, with as much kindness as you can muster, for only God knows the burdens that each person carries.

Listen in the daily rhythms of your days, in the words of friend and stranger, in the things that happen and the things you hope for, for the voice of God. "If God speaks anywhere," writes Frederick Buechner, "it is into our personal lives that God speaks. Someone we love dies. Some unforeseen act of kindness or cruelty touches the heart or makes the blood turn cold. We fail a friend, or a friend fails us, and we are appalled at the capacity we all have for estranging the very people in our lives we need the most. Or maybe nothing extraordinary happens at all—just one day following another. We sleep and dream. We wake. We work. We remember and forget. We have fun and are depressed. And into the thick of it, or out of the thick of it, God speaks. God speaks and the words are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. Listen for God."²

How are we to listen?

First we must stop talking. We can't talk and listen at the same time—which seems obvious enough, except that we all try. For we all need to talk, and it's important that we do. Sometimes we can't know what we think or how we feel until we give words to our experiences. But in order to listen, we need to get all the words out and then *stop talking*, in order that another voice may speak.

Listening also requires a certain degree of stillness. It isn't just silence, which you know as well as I can be charged with so much emotion or tension that we might as well be yelling. Stillness implies spaciousness, having space within that allows us to receive from another. All the spiritual masters tell us that the best way to create that kind of space is to sit still, if even for a few moments, and wait for our hearts to stop pounding, our minds to cease racing, our anxieties to quiet. In the spaciousness that follows, we are

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 1. Palmer quotes "Ask Me" by William Stafford.

² Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 2-5.

open to receive. But sometimes sitting still is impossible, at least for me. Sometimes I have to move to create stillness. I walk; I clean; last night I made soup. In other words, I do whatever I need to do in order to reach that place of stillness. Once I'm there, movement, or the lack of it, isn't important anymore. For the space within is the receptacle for whatever comes from my own inner wisdom or the words of another, from the beauty or heartache of my surroundings, and through all these things or in spite of them, from the heart of God. It doesn't matter so much how you arrive at a place of stillness, only that you do.

Finally, listening requires a certain degree of pondering, following the example of Mary, Jesus' mother, who pondered things in her heart. To ponder means to consider something deeply and intently, to meditate on its meaning. It's often said that it isn't the events of our lives that affect us, but rather how we interpret those events. Sometimes the meaning of things is obvious enough: when good prevails or when the mistakes we've made teach the lessons, that in retrospect, we realize we needed to learn. But often meaning is not clear: the pieces don't add up in any logical way, except through the eyes of grace and the mercies of God. In those instances especially, we need time to ponder what things mean.

At the CREDO faculty meeting I attended last week, we were introduced to a new tool for self reflection called "Connecting the Dots." The first step in connecting the dots is to identify 4 or 5 key moments in your life—however you would define them, good, bad, hard, joyful, whatever surfaces in your mind as important.

The next step is to consider all the things that both led up to and flowed out of those events, the larger context of your life. The final step is to take stock in a more comprehensive way: how physically healthy were you then? Was it a time of financial stress or relative ease? What was your sense of vocation, or life's work at that time? And finally, how did you feel spiritually?

Listening to a small group of people reflect on their moments and all that surrounded them, I was struck by how some people defined their best spiritual moments as those when everything else in their life was in balance or harmony. Others, however, realized that they felt the most spiritually alive—that God spoke to them most clearly and directly—in times of real crisis in other realms. What does that say to us about God, and how God speaks? What meaning can we give to the harder moments if in those moments, or through them, we come to know God as we've never known God before?

Lent is a season for talking less, creating stillness within, and pondering the deeper meaning of our lives. But the world doesn't stop for 40 days. We must go on living and caring as best we can. We may even discover this Lent new ways to stretch and to give. My point is simply this: there will never be a shortage of legitimate claims on our time, or of good things that we could do, for ourselves or others. There will never be a time when we aren't called upon to respond to the needs around us. But precious is the time we have to spend on reflection and prayer. Precious is the time we dedicate to creating meaning of the things that happen to us. Precious is the time we have to discern of all the many good things God could call us to, the one thing God is calling us to now.

It may seem selfish, taking time for pondering in this way. But I encourage you to persevere. For from our pondering time comes the kind of clarity that frees us to give our hearts fully and joyfully to whatever it is that we hear, when we stop long enough to listen.