Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2019

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Luke 18:9-14
1 Samuel 3:1-10

Renewed in Prayer

Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’”  
1 Samuel 3:10

I’m always surprised when I hear people say that they don’t like coming to worship if they’re not doing anything. They mean things like ushering, singing a solo, or serving communion. I understand that we all want to feel like we’re contributing, but the most striking thing about God’s command to keep Sabbath is that it begins by not doing anything! The Hebrew word, Shabbat, or Sabbath means, “Stop. Quit. Take a break.” Or, as Anne Lamott famously said: “Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.” ¹ …especially you.

Furthermore, what we are doing here is the reason we were born. Our Reformed ancestors described it perfectly when they asked, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

Connecting with each other and with God in prayer and worship, and the dedicating of our lives to Jesus Christ week by week, that is “doing something”—these are quite simply the most important things you and I will ever do. We come here each week to pray and give our lives back in love to God who gave us everything. If you and I are to honor God in the proper way --- as we are clearly commanded to do, then we have to stop running around, and relax. Stop. Take a break and Listen. Listen to God’s word.

So take a deep breath. Be still. Let yourself be surrounded by the music and the memories of all that God has done. And listen. Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Two men went up to the temple to pray.

One of them was full of words, rattling off a variation of a daily prayer from the Siddur (see-doer), the Jewish book of daily prayer. As he continues, telling God how very observant he is, another man stands nearby. He is known in the community as a traitor and a sinner. Yet he prays with humility and purpose. He prays to receive God’s mercy. This man and not the other will receive God’s blessing, this man, and not the other is our model. Jesus says, Be still and know that I am God. ²
C.S. Lewis, surely one of the great Christian voices of our time, pointed out that spiritual growth and maturity are not automatic. They require our attention and careful, prayerful listening for the voice of God. Lewis wrote:

“The very moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And your first job each morning consists in shoving it all back, [and] listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”

The voice of the Spirit...you can hear it... in all its gentle wonder and thundering beauty. You can hear it if you try.

Come with me, back to a time when the voice of God was rarely heard, a wild and lawless time, when visions were few and, There was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes. Eli was High Priest at Shiloh. One day he heard a woman praying out loud in the temple, not arrogantly or self-righteously, but earnestly pleading with God. Her name was Hannah and she made a vow -- if God would remember her, and give her a child, she would dedicate him forever to God.

To make a long and beautiful story short, Hannah did give birth to a son. She named him Samuel. When he was still young she kept her promise and brought the boy to Shiloh to serve as acolyte to Eli who by then was very old. In time Samuel became one of the greatest of all the leaders of Israel. Here, in our reading for today, Samuel is still a boy, living in the temple and serving the old priest.

Listen to 1 Samuel 3 beginning at verse one.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, “Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.
Giving God, your word is the light by which we see both the past and the future. Your voice guides through dark places. Following you is perfect freedom; in you we discover peace. Today and every day, help us listen and hear your truth, revealed in prayer. Amen.

When God calls to you, say, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

God’s will for you and me, as well as God’s comfort, direction, and hope are all revealed in prayer. Are you listening?

That Pharisee in the Temple was doing a lot of talking. He had a list and he was going through it, checking off the boxes. Now, we all do that. The scripture tells us not to worry about anything:

But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We bring our petitions to God and God hears us, certainly God hears, but do we hear God? It isn’t easy. The contemporary theologian Lily Tomlin once asked, “Why is it that when I speak to God they call it prayer, when God speaks to me they call it schizophrenia?” The most important part of listening prayer is showing up – for worship in the sanctuary and for quiet time alone with God…making space for God in the week.

I stumbled into the practice of listening prayer many years ago. I was in my late 30’s and facing a major life transition. My life was good: I had a successful ministry I loved, a young family, and all the joys and responsibilities that brings. I had a dog, and a garden, and I was an officer in the PTA. Then one day I took a surprise phone call from the pastor nominating committee of a church I knew and admired, offering me a different call with a greatly increased level of responsibility. It was an exciting opportunity. I could imagine accepting, but at what cost? There were so many sleepless nights. In prayer I begged God for guidance. But was I listening?

I can’t speak for you, but when I fail to listen to God in prayer, it’s usually because I’m afraid of what I will hear. Negative thoughts rush in, and I convince myself that God is going to ask me for something that is too difficult. I fail in my trust – as though God’s plans could somehow be wrong. Silly, huh?

During that critical time in my life a precious friend taught me to pray, “Lord, show me what you want to do through me.” It’s a very different prayer from, “God, here’s what I want.” It’s essentially the same prayer old Eli taught Samuel to pray, Speak Lord, your servant is listening. That prayer changes everything!

“God, what do you want to do through me?”
This prayer has become the hallmark of our capital campaign at Woods. This prayer isn’t about my little plans and dreams, but something much larger. This is a prayer of confidence in God,
the knowledge that God can and will use you and me to transform lives and community here in Jesus Christ.

“God, show me what you want to do through me,” is a prayer of risk and opportunity. It’s my chance, and yours, to be personally involved in God’s mission in the world and the promise that we can be a part of it.

You heard Tom say that he and Gayle are pledging to the Woods Renew campaign. Tawes and I have made that same decision. In fact, we are pledging more to this campaign than we have given to anything before in our lives. That decision is wonderful, and terrifying, given our current situation. Just as soon as we finished paying for our kids’ education, one of us (not me) got sick. Medical bills will bring you to your knees, won’t they? But this pledge is not about our expenses, it’s about our faith.

We are making this pledge because we have heard God speak through the voice of this congregation about how important these projects are to Woods Church, how important it is that Woods stay strong. Woods Church is literally the light on the hill for this community. That light must brightly shine.

In the last few weeks you and I have received a number of death notices… stalwart Christians who in many ways have made Woods what it is today. Now it’s time for those who are younger to step up to leadership.

Woods Church exists to be a light, pointing people to the Kingdom of God in the world. Our purpose isn’t to satisfy our selves but to glorify God and enjoy God – forever! Our prayers for the Renew campaign, and for everything else we do together as a church, ought to be to this larger purpose – praying,

“God, what you want to do through me?”

Here is a story, and then I’ll close. Once upon a time there was a garden, a beautiful bamboo garden where the Owner used to walk in the cool of the evening. Often the Wind would come and gently blow through the garden, and the Bamboo would dance, tossing and swaying and bowing down. This delighted the Owner of the garden.

One day the Owner came to the garden, and the bamboo in adoration bowed its stalks in love and greeting. The Owner said, “Bamboo, I have need of you.” Bamboo heard this with joy. This is the day he had been waiting for, a chance to serve the Owner.

“Please,” said Bamboo, “Tell me what you want me to do.” Bamboo was thinking of a praise dance, or perhaps some shade. He was shocked to hear the Owner say, “I want to cut you down. I need some of your wood to build a bridge.” “Cut me down?” Bamboo was horrified. “But … but I am the most beautiful part of your garden.”
“I understand your fear,” the Owner said, “but there is need.” The Bamboo grew very still. The Wind held her breath. Then slowly Bamboo bent his head and whispered, “If you cannot use me except by taking a part of me, then cut me down.”

And so the Owner of the garden took some of Bamboo’s stalks and removed his leaves and branches. Very gently the Owner carried Bamboo to the place where there was a fresh spring of water and made a bridge. And on the other side of the bridge the Owner planted rice, and as days went by the shoots grew up and the harvest came.

And what about Bamboo? Well, you know the rest of the story -- if you have ever harvested Bamboo. His stalks returned with even greater, lusher abundance, as it does to this day. And as God provides for all who offer our listening hearts to God, praying,

“Lord, what do you want to do through me?”

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\(^1\) Anne Lammott, “12 Things I learned from life and writing” Ted.com
\(^2\) Psalm 46:10
\(^3\) C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillian, 1960, 168
\(^4\) Judges 21:25
\(^5\) Philippians 4:6-7