

Learning to Listen
Sermon Series: Teach Us to Pray
1 Samuel 3:1–18; Matthew 6:5–7
Sunday, August 11, 2024

Let us pray: Help us to hear your voice, Lord, above all the other voices – within us and around us – that clamor for our attention. Still our bodies, our minds, our spirits, so that we can know you, and know who you are calling us to be, in Christ. Amen.

There is a verse in Luke’s gospel where Jesus is praying, and his disciples come to him and say, “Lord, teach *us* to pray, as John (the Baptist) taught *his* disciples.” *Teach us to pray*. Which implies either that they did not *know* how to pray, or that they wanted Jesus to teach them a specific *way* to pray. One of the questions that I hear all the time as a pastor is, “How can I get better at praying?” Either someone doesn’t really know how to pray, or they want to grow in their prayer life. So if *you* struggle to pray – if you don’t know *how* to pray, or you feel like you’re just not very good at it, or you just want to grow in prayer – then you are not alone. A lot of other people feel the same way, and apparently Jesus’ disciples felt the same way.

So what we’re going to do over the next few weeks is think about prayer – how to *do* it if you don’t know how, and how to grow in it if you *do* know how. Because there is *always* room for growth in prayer. This is not something that we ever *master* in this life. There is never going to be a point where you say, “I have perfected prayer!” It is a constant journey. What works for you at one point in your life might not work at another point.

What we need to do first, though, is understand what prayer is. If you ask the average person what prayer is, I would bet that most people would say, “Prayer is talking to God.” And yes, that is *part* of it. But prayer is so much *more* than that. Prayer is *communion* with God. If I had to

define prayer, if someone came up to me and said, “What is prayer,” that’s what I would say. Prayer is communion with God. It is a *relationship* with God, *friendship* with God. It is spending time with God. It is getting to know God and letting God know you.

Prayer is different than meditation. Meditation is solitary. It is something that we do by ourselves (or even if we do it with other people, it is *individualistic*; it takes place solely within you). Meditation is *thinking* about God (or thinking about *something*). Meditation is where you shut out the world around you and just reflect or focus on something (or you try to clear your mind and focus on nothing at all). Meditation is *good*. It can be a *part* of prayer, but it’s not the whole thing. Because while meditation is solitary, *thinking* about God, prayer is *relational*. It is *being* with God. Communing with God. Prayer is not something that you can do by yourself, and what I mean by that is that you always have a partner, and that partner is God. Your prayer is always directed *toward* someone. When you pray, God is always present with you. Whether you can *feel* God’s presence or not, God is *always* there with you.

And that is the first thing that we need to do when we pray. We need to get ourselves in the mindset of, “I am *with God*. God is with me. I am not alone right now. I am in the presence of God. I am communing with God. I am spending time with Jesus (that’s one of my favorite ways that I have heard someone talk about prayer, because we can *picture* that; we know what it looks like to spend time with someone).”

Prayer is not about shutting yourself off to the world around you. It is about opening yourself up to God and to the world and to other people; opening your heart and your mind in love.

Prayer is not a means to an end. “I want to pray so that I can grow in my relationship with God.” Prayer *is* your relationship with God. When you pray, you are in relationship with God. You are *present* with God. You are *communing* with God. “I want to pray so that I can get this thing that I need.” God *knows* what you need. Do *you* really know what you need? We know what we *want*, but do we know what we really *need*? Prayer is not just telling God what we want. It is also opening ourselves up to what God wants *for* us, in the hope that *our* wills can align with the will of *God*.

And prayer is not just *talking* to God. Prayer is a relationship with God, and all relationships involve talking *and* listening. Prayer is conversational. So we need to be able to *talk* to God, but we also have to nurture our capacity to *listen* to God. How did you first learn how to talk? Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about this; he says that we weren’t *born* with the ability to speak. You had to *learn* to speak, and the way that you *did* that was by listening to your parents. Before you could ever *talk*, you had to *listen*. And that’s how it is with prayer. Before we can *talk* to God, we need to *listen* to God.

Samuel was a prophet and a leader in ancient Israel. But *before* that, he was a 12-year-old boy serving in the temple under the priest Eli. It says that he did not yet know the Lord. One night he is lying in the temple, and he hears a voice calling his name. He thinks it’s Eli, so he runs in to see what he wants. Eli says, “I didn’t call you. Go lie back down.” This happens two more times. Finally, Eli realizes that God is speaking to Samuel. And he says to Samuel, “Go lie down, and if you hear the voice again, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So he goes back and lies down, he hears the voice again, and he says, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And then God speaks to Samuel.

Samuel did not initiate the conversation. God did. Samuel did not have the first word. God did. Samuel did not have the *last* word. God did. All Samuel did was listen.

We live in a culture that is not very good at listening. So many people listen only to formulate a response. While you're talking, they're thinking about what they're going to say back. About a year ago, when I did my doctoral project, I brought together a group of 23 people, some of whom identified politically as liberal and some as conservative, to have a conversation about a potentially divisive topic of their choosing (they chose gun control). But the way we did it was that first the conservative group sat in a circle, and they went around with each person taking about five minutes to say what they believe about gun control and why they believe that way.

No one else in the room was allowed to respond. No one could talk while *they* were talking, and no one could say anything *after* they talked. When it was your turn to talk, you could not say, "I want to go back real quick and talk about something that Bill said." They couldn't sigh. They couldn't laugh. They couldn't roll their eyes or throw their arms up in the air. They could not respond audibly or visually. All they could do was sit there, be still and quiet, and listen.

It was *hard*. It took some getting used to. But I've told you before what happened at the end. We came back into one big group, and I said, "What did you learn," and right away someone said, "We have a lot more in common than I thought!" When they *listened*, they *heard*. They didn't have to worry about formulating their own response. They didn't have to worry about debating or defending what they believed. All they had to do was be still and quiet and listen, and when they did, they actually came to *know* this other person.

We live in a culture that is not very good at being still and quiet. We are always moving, always on the go, always surrounded by noise. If we're being still and quiet, it feels like we're doing nothing, and we are taught from a very young age that we have to be *productive*. Being still and quiet feels lazy. Is it any wonder, then, that we live in a culture in which people feel more and more disconnected from God and from each other?

You might say, "Yeah, but God doesn't actually *talk* to us. We're not going to hear a booming voice in the sky." How do you know, unless you listen? In Samuel's story, it says that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. People didn't hear God speaking. I think that the word of the Lord is rare in *these* days, but not because God isn't speaking. We just aren't listening. And like we heard earlier in the Call to Worship, it's not always a big, booming voice. Sometimes God speaks to us through the still, small voice inside of us. Sometimes God speaks in the sound of sheer silence. But we'll never *hear* it if we're always talking, always on the move, always surrounded by noise. We need to *learn* how to listen.

So let's practice that now. When I pray in the morning, I have a very specific routine that I go through. Before I do anything else, I get into a comfortable position with both feet flat on the floor, so do that now. Sit as comfortably as you can in a pew, with your feet on the floor and your hands in your lap, and just relax. Close your eyes. Drop your shoulders.

Then I say to myself, "Still your voice." That's easy. Just stop talking. You've already got that!

Then I say, "Still my body." Don't tap your feet or bounce your legs. Don't fidget with your hands; just relax your fingers. Sit still and quiet and just breathe.

Then I say, “Still your mind.” That’s harder. Try not to think about anything else. This is why we close our eyes, because we *think* about what we *see*. Don’t worry about if you’re being still enough. Don’t worry about what’s going on somewhere else. This is where meditation can be helpful. You can picture something like a cross in your mind, if that helps you clear your mind and not think about anything else. What I do sometimes is try to picture Jesus sitting right across from me. It’s not about your mind being totally empty. It’s about stilling your mind of any other thoughts and directing your attention to God. So still your mind.

Then I say, “Still your spirit.” This is about quieting yourself on a *deeper* level. Are you anxious? Worried about anything? Fearful of anything? Sad? Excited? Let go of all that and just *be*. Go back to your cross (or whatever you picture in your mind). Focus on your breathing; picture the air going into your nose and out of it.

Still your voice, your body, your mind, your spirit. Just *be* with God. (*fifteen seconds of silence*)

Open your eyes. That was fifteen seconds of stillness and silence. Maybe next time you try 30. Then a minute. That’s not a lot of time, but it puts us in a posture of being ready to listen. Once I’ve done that, once I have stilled my voice and my body and my mind and my spirit, then I read a psalm. After that, I read a chapter from the gospels. I just go in order. If it’s the first day of the year, I read Psalm 1. If it’s the 150th day of the year, I read Psalm 150. I start with Matthew chapter one, and then go to chapter two the next day, all the way to chapter 20 of John’s gospel. There are 89 chapters in the gospels. It will take you 89 days. And reading a chapter takes maybe five minutes. Sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less, but it’s never as long as we think. Don’t worry about fully *understanding* it or figuring it out or thinking, “What does this *mean*?” Just listen to it. Hear the words. Because that’s how we learn the language.

Once I have read a psalm and a chapter of the gospels, then I still myself again, and I listen. God has *already* spoken to us through scripture. So I just try to listen for what God might be saying to me in this psalm and this chapter. Does a word or an image or a thought stand out to me? I think back through the verses that I have just read. Is there a central theme in each of them (forgiveness, fear, joy, love, healing)? How might God be speaking to me in what I just read?

It is only *then*, after I have spent time listening, that I am ready to speak. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that we *begin* with silence because God has the first word. Mother Teresa said that the beginning of prayer is scripture and silence. We listen to God speaking in the silence of the heart. And then we begin to speak to God from the fullness of the heart. And God listens. *That* is really prayer, she says. Both sides listening, and both sides speaking.

Jesus says that when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who pray so that they can be seen and heard by others. When you pray, he says, go into your room and shut the door (even if the room you go into is the room of your own mind). Do not heap up empty phrases, thinking that you will be heard because of your many words. St. Augustine said that we may pray the most when we say the least, and we may pray the least when we say the most.

I want to encourage you this week to practice this at least one more time. That's your homework. Practice stilling your voice and your body and your mind and your spirit. Practice spending at least 30 seconds in silence. Say to God, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Practice being still and silent and listen for what God might be saying to you.

The Brass are going to come up and play, “Abide with Me.” I want to invite you to open your hymnals up to hymn #700. While they play, read along with the words to this hymn, and just listen. Hear the music. Hear the words. How might God be speaking to you in this? Once we have listened, we will stand up and sing our praises to God in the Doxology. But for now, still yourself and just *be* with God.