

## Listen for the Pain

Sermon: Hilltop United Methodist Church

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*This was not the sermon I had planned to deliver on November 13, 2016.*

*That said, I had more than one person suggest to me that they were in pain in 2008 or 2012 and we didn't deal with their pain. Many of us saw John McCain and Mitt Romney as ethical and moral men, who lost a political debate. I supported both of them financially and with my vote. However, I did not feel a moral earthquake in their losses.*

*Donald Trump's discourse is jarringly different than that of McCain and Romney. I will try and listen closer, but I do not sense the issue of pain from the left is as much about political loss as it is loss to "that man", i.e. a man of questionable character.*

*That is the lens I tried to use in what is delivered here as what may appear to be a monologue, but is in fact, a dialogue with many and with the sacred. If this comes across as a rant, then I have failed. I assure the reader that I prayed a lot before delivering this, and I did not want it to come across as the rant of a loser. In fact, I see this as an invitation for us to listen more closely to those around us.*

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We're continuing our movement through the Old Testament and two weeks ago we focused on Elijah. Elijah was a prophet to the northern kingdom. If you recall, the northern kingdom decided that they had enjoyed as much of this unified stuff as they could take. The north went off in their direction and the south went in their own direction.

Our reading today comes to you from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is a prophet to the southern kingdom.

I am reading from Chapter 6, verses 1 through 8. I want you to focus a little bit on the nature of what Isaiah's reaction is to the call and I want to focus a little bit on what god's reaction is to that. It has an element that came over from what we heard earlier from Luke 5 (Simon Peter when with others he experienced the miracle of Jesus filling the nets with fish confessing he was a "sinful man.") I think you will hear in Isaiah's reaction, Simon Peter's reaction to the miracles of Jesus: a sense of humility

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hems of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go with me?" And I said, "Here I am; send me!"

Those of you that have been here for a while know that I have three primary leadership principles I operate from.

Number one is this idea of love your congregation where they are. My own experience with pastors is if decide that they don't really love their congregation yet. They're going to love them, they get to a different place, they fail. Conditional Grace doesn't work.

The second principle that I operate from and this is the hard one for me: there is a God and you, Dennis, are not it. I imagine most of us can experience and relate to that.

Back in January of 2015 I preached a sermon focusing on the idea of my third leadership principle which is -- learn to listen for the pain.

Learn to listen for pain that is there.

I confess to you in this political run up, I'm not sure that I was as attentive to the pain as perhaps I should have been. I don't know quite what happened. I don't know quite where I got out of kilter with so many of people that were out there and angry and frustrated and in pain. I confess, I preached a sermon in April where I talked about the voices of fear that I thought I heard out there and I was talking about the general political landscape, not just any one party by itself.

Fear and anger are two sides of the same coin, and I think we have a lot of anger right now in our land.

I want to focus a little bit on the idea of learning to listen for that pain in some kind of way. Learning to listen in a Christ like, Christian way. I'm reminded of Ecclesiastes 3 verse 4 where it lays out for us the fact that there is a time for many things -- "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" -- the dilemma of course is that when some people are going to be weeping, others are going to be dancing and when some are dancing, others are going to be weeping.

Romans 12:15 does say for us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

This can be hard but we're invited to go and mourn and share the common experience with others, when they're in joy try to be joyful with them. When they're in pain, try to be in pain with them and understand what's going on.

I wonder if our hymns don't help us understand a little bit about how it is that we potentially might deal with what's going on right now in our hearts and in our souls.

*(Sung) Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side.  
Bear patiently, the cross of grief or pain.  
Leave to your God to order and provide,  
in every change God faithful will remain.*

I normally intentionally craft sermons in such a way so some of the time what I don't say is there for you to grow into. It's strategic. I want that to happen on *most* occasions.

Today I really want you to listen to what I *am* saying and don't dwell on what I am not saying.

Let me offer you three quick illustrations.

One of the leading ethics professors at the United States is at Duke University and preached a sermon on Tuesday morning -- Tuesday morning and he reminded people that democracy is a great thing. But remember that in the biblical example, when democracy was exercised on the first Good Friday and offered a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, who did they choose?

When I offered that the first time, somebody came back and said, "Are you saying Hillary Clinton is Jesus?" *I am not*. Listen to what I said. I'm talking about people making choices.

On Tuesday, I used the church as locker room illustration of church is the locker room where we get the pep talk but we play the game of life outside the locker room, i.e. the church. Several then said, "You got to be careful about using the word locker room anymore it's been appropriated by one of the presidential candidates."

Excuse me but I reject that.

There's nothing wrong with talking about locker rooms. If you take this to the theater of the completely absurd, what you do if you fully embrace that logic is run the risk of your political opponent sitting down and reading on the radio or TV an standard English dictionary and then, therefore, have taken all the words that you could ever use away from you. I've been in many locker rooms. They can be a place for exhortation, not humiliation.

There's a phrase on the internet where we sometimes use the idea that when you get to a place, we say "wash, rinse, repeat." What it means is take that idea that you've developed and now repeatedly use that idea in a repetitive way. Last week when I used it, a person said, "Are you saying that we should all feel dirty because of what happened here on this day?" No. I'm not saying that. I'm saying take the idea I am about to propose and just keep repeating the idea over and over and over again for yourself until you get to a place where you can understand what's going on.

Here's my observation about what is going on in the Luke passage and the Isaiah passage.

Let me emphasize to you that the words emotional intelligence (EQ) do not link them together any place in the bible. They aren't there. But emotional intelligence, emotional quotient (EQ) is the idea of truly knowing yourself<sup>1</sup>. I frankly believe this is an implied element throughout the scripture: know yourself!

This conversation starts the very first dialogue God has with the human creature. If you could put quotation marks around a conversation with us in what could be called a conversation, it is framed as a question and that question is, "Where are you?"<sup>2</sup>

God is omniscient that means God knows everything. *Do you think God really is asking literally the question 'I don't know where you are, where are you?'*

God knows where you are. The question is for us. *Do we know where we are?*

The invitation for us throughout the bible over and over and over again is to exercise emotional intelligence of learning where we are and, arguably, where it is that the people who cohabitate this planet with us are. It's important for us to be able to stop and examine that.

You notice that Isaiah and Simon Peter's reaction is both remarkably similar: humility.

When encountering the power of the sacred, when encountering this majesty, this glory of God, what are both of their reactions? I'm not worthy. I'm sinful. There's something wrong. God in Isaiah and Jesus in the Luke passage restores them. Restores them and he does that through healing and telling them that they have been healed of their sins. Notice they do not stay where they are. He calls them out of that place.

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that emotional intelligence is also about understanding the other, but in this context, I felt it valuable to focus on ourselves. Please forgive me. I get to us in a few words.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3.

(Sung) Be still my soul. Your God will undertake.  
To guide the future as in ages past.  
Your hope, your confidence, let nothing shake.  
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.

Here's my invitation for us this morning and I've used it before in various conversations here at Hilltop:  
*Listen in order to understand, rather than to respond.*

Maybe the best thing I ever wrote here at Hilltop was a March 2013 newsletter article that I focused on this idea of how you get rid of negativity and part of how you get rid of negativity is keep asking yourself, keep asking the person you're talking to the question of, "Help me understand. Help me understand. Help me understand."

We've gotten to a place in our culture where too often, far too often, we listen in order to respond rather than listening to understand. I've been to various things in my life where in order to talk you have to have something in your hand. I've got here a block of wood showing the three crosses at Calvary. Might it be possible for us to impose a prayer stick rule at times? In order to be able to talk at that group, there might be six or eight people there and you can't really talk unless you've got this in your hand. It makes it pretty hard to talk over each other when you have a rule that says you must have something in your hand (lifting up the block of wood).

If that's not good enough for you, you can always bring you John Wesley bobble head. Everybody's got a John Wesley bobble head, right? (Shake it and hear it rattle). Don't you all have one at home? That's what you need. You have this idea of John Wesley bobble head in your hand because John Wesley talks about how it is that we need to focus on God's grace that's there and let's figure out what it is that's essential and let's agree on those things and those things for which are not essential, we will figure out a way to be in conversation with each other but in everything, we're going to be charitable towards each other.

Wouldn't that be a good idea if we could be charitable towards each other? How do you go about doing that?

I would say first, the first element is this element of recognition that is laid out for us here by Luke as he tells the Simon Peter story and is laid out here by Isaiah as he tells his own story which is this idea of enough emotional intelligence to exercise humility.

None of us knows everything and my guess is everybody here has an opportunity to stop and examine our dialogue with others. But so often, we talk over each other.

I get it. I am used to shutting out or off those things I don't like or don't want to hear or don't want to understand.

I have Pandora. For those of you that don't, it is music designed around your personal tastes. Something comes on Pandora and I don't like it, I click a button and I tell Pandora don't play that again and advance to the next song.

I have FaceBook. I got it. I understand. When somebody really annoys me, I can just simply say I'm going to unfriend them, and if they really annoy me, I can block them from even seeing that I am alive.

I'm on Twitter. When somebody out there on Twitter says something I find a little annoying or something I don't like, all I got to do is just click a button and just unfollow them. That's all I've got to do.

What am I doing when I do that? I'm getting into my own echo chamber. I'm sitting there talking to myself over and over and over again and if it's not myself, it's like minded people.

And the echo chamber is not isolated to the "right."

I've had two surveys this year call me and ask me some questions about political questions and invariably they come to the issue of Fox News. These university student designed surveys end up invariably asking me some kind of question about Fox News and I wait for the other side of the question and they never ask me about MSNBC. To most of us, they are two sides of the same coin. Every time somebody criticizes Fox News, I'm waiting (patiently I hope) to ask the question, "What about MSNBC in this conversation? One's at one end and one's at the other." All too many can seem to do is find the errors of one, but not the other. I think that is the borderline definition of an echo chamber. (I'm not a regular Fox News watcher/listener.)

Yeah I live in a Pandora world. I can say I don't like that.

I live in a FaceBook world. I can say I'm going to unfriend you.

I live in a Twitter world and unfollow.

But I think we learn a lot by listening to those people we don't agree with.

Maybe, just maybe what we have to do is take up our John Wesley bobble head and just shut up for a second. Actually hand it to them and then we shut up and listen in charity. That's it. I think it's important for us to be able to do that. How do we go about doing that?

I think we have to recognize that we're like Simon Peter. We're like Isaiah. We have to recognize that we've got flaws ourselves and we learn some things from that. Emotional Intelligence. Humility.

(Sung) Be still my soul the hour is hastening on,  
When we shall be forever with the Lord.  
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,  
sorrow forgot love's purest joys restore.

Our goals and objective aren't to win political conversations with those who don't agree with us.

I'm not remotely suggesting that you let go of those things that are important to you.

I don't know what the outcomes are going to be but for those of you that are concerned about the Supreme court, then continue to be concerned about the Supreme court. I don't know how the compromise is going to be worked out between the republicans and the evangelical conservative community out there as it relates to gay rights. I don't know how it's going to get worked out but if that's an important issue to you, don't stop. Don't stop.

Let that continue to be an important issue with you.

But maybe we should let Jesus mess with our self understanding, our hubris.

This Jesus guy can really mess with our understanding of what the world is. The dilemma that we have is that we domesticated him. We too often domesticate him because we don't understand the vocabulary of what he's saying. For example, Jesus in Luke 4 basically tells the synagogue that the message came to the non-Israelites just like it came to the Israelites and what's their reaction? They want to run him out of town. Want to run him out of town. How is that for emotional intelligence? Luke seems to be providing a negative critique on their self awareness.

When Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, we domesticate it. We can think we have an idea of the word Samaritan, but I doubt it. Quick review: Jesus is addressing in this parable who is my neighbor? Jesus tells this story about a Samaritan, the theological antithesis of the Jews. Try this: if you're on the HRC side, I would say to you when you tell the story add Donald Trump's follower to it and if you're a Donald Trump follower and you think that as you tell the story add Hillary Clinton to the other side. Now you might get an idea of the intensity of what Jesus is driving at.

Jesus is messing with your understanding of the world and he's saying that the one who has shown the capacity to be the good neighbor in the story is not the one you would expect. Believe me. There were people in Jesus' world that had trouble listening to this message. They had trouble listening to that big time.

Peggy Newnan focused in her Wall Street Journal article editorial on Friday there's going to be people out there that are Trump loyalists, expected, and there will be opportunists. We should try to do everything we can to minimize the opportunist because they're probably focused on what's in it for them.

She suggests there is a third category of people out there and she called them patriots. Please realize that Peggy's Catholicism strongly influences who she is. Peggy Newnan called them patriots but I would suggest we might say followers of God.

Hold your values. Continue to hold your values in such a way that you can continue to tell them who you are.

But at the same time, Lincoln's second inaugural reminds us that part of our important task is to bind up the wounds of those that are hurt. This is a wonderful time for us to stop and pause and bind up the wounds. There's a lot of hurt people out there.

Here's the critical thing for us. We've got to learn to listen for the pain. I think what happened over the last 18 months is for many of us that have good salaries, good incomes, good things are happening to us, good healthcare, good, good, good all this kind of stuff that's out there, somewhere along the line, we got tone deaf. We got tone deaf to the pain of other people.

People that wanted to work 40 hours a week and only work 32.

People who have been used to working for \$20 an hour and now have to work for \$15.

People who's insurance policies were about \$10,000 and now they're we're \$15,000.

We somehow got tone deaf to that.

I don't know how this particular man was able to plug in to that but I will say to you he was able to figure out where the pain was and he listened to that pain and I think that's for us the primary lesson for us today.

I read an article by Bill Moyers who suggested that on Tuesday night, America Died. That is not helpful.

I'm sympathetic to those that are in pain because they believe that the character issue matters. It mattered to me. It still matters to me.

I don't want to dismiss the character issue. What I want to focus on though is not the person that got elected. What I want to focus on is the people that helped elect him.

I would say to you that if we walk in and just try to shame everyone who voted different than you as misogynist, as homophobic, as racists, we're missing the pain. I would say to you in our whole

conversations with all of them, we need to pick up the cross (or maybe a John Wesley Bobblehead), hand it to them and let them talk and we quietly listen for a while without trying to generate a response.

Let us be in an attitude of prayer.

Gracious and loving God, you call us into this place. You call us into this place and we're seeking insight, we're seeking wisdom, we're seeking information about how to live our lives and then you give us these little surprises that we plan weeks in advance as to what the scripture is going to be and then the week comes up and you give us the right answer at the right time. Let us listen to your voice, let us listen to your small still voice, let us be your people in all that we do but let us listen humbly in all our conversations with our fellow sisters and our fellow brothers in Christ and all of God's children say, Amen.

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***This is drawn from a transcript of the given sermon. I have edited it a little.***