

August 30, 2020

PENTECOST 13 SUNDAY

Prelude: Sonata in C by W. A. Mozart

Pianist: Bruce Nasmith

Worship Theme & Welcome

CALL TO WORSHIP:

We are called to love the Lord our God.

We are called to love with all our heart and soul,
with all our mind and strength.

We come to worship to remind ourselves of this love.

It is a love that asks us to pay attention.

It is a love that teaches us to love our neighbours.

It is a love that implores us to truly hear, listen, act and respond to God's perfect love.

Come, let us worship the Lord our God
and listen for God in this time of worship!

Hymn #412: "Come, let us sing to the Lord our song"

Soloists: Shaun Alphonso & Chris Tanaka-Mann, Organist: Bruce Nasmith

Prayer of Approach, Confession & The Lord's Prayer

The Peace of Christ be with you all;
And also with you.

Special Music: "How beautiful are the feet" by G. F. Handel

Soloist: Anna Bateman, Pianist: Bruce Nasmith

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 ; Mark 12:28-34

Sermon: LISTEN AND RESPOND IN LOVE

Special Music: “The gift of Love” American folk tune arr. by Hal Hopson

Soloist: Erin Stone, Pianist: Bruce Nasmith

Prayers of Thanksgiving & Pastoral Concern

Hymn #472: “We are God's people”

Soloists: Elias Theocharidis & Jim Nasmith, Organist: Bruce Nasmith

Benediction

Threefold Amen

Postlude: Hornpipe by G. F. Handel

Organist: Bruce Nasmith



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“Discover the Vitality of faith”

PRAYERS OF APPROACH, CONFESSION & THE LORD'S PRAYER

We are here, O God, we are present... we are listening... what are we listening for?... Is it a word of hope?... Is it a word that may inspire some renewed faith in us, some greater love in our hearts?... What do we need, O God?... what do we want?... How can we figure out what is right for us at this time of our lives... in ourselves... in our relationships?... What is it that we fear most right now, O God?... May we bring all these and other questions into our worship, O God, listening for a word you may speak into our minds and hearts we may especially need to hear right now...

But clearing space to listen also means purging some of the excess baggage that distracts us, O God... we hurt and we shame... we irritate and take offense... we judge and we despair... we give up faith and take matters into our own hands, failing to wait, to listen and to learn new ways of being and doing, relating and trusting...

Hear us now as we take a few moments in silence, to open up our minds and hearts in confession... to open up our spirits before you so you can read us inside out, trusting your love greater than our flaws and failings...

You are grace, O God, and grace is the gift of love. Your love is a gift because it is far greater, richer and more steadfast than anything we may earn or deserve... You are forgiveness, whether we have the courage and resolve to fully repent or not... You wait for us to take your hand and dance with you anew into a better way of being... Thank you... And we pray this way with confidence, because Jesus taught us to pray, and he also taught us his own special prayer which we now pray, saying: Our Father...

SCRIPTURES

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

6 Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, 2 so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. 3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Mark 12:28-34

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32 Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33 and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbour as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

LISTEN AND RESPOND IN LOVE

Rev. Rebecca Jess

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Those words from Deuteronomy, spoken by Moses to the Israelite people before they finally left the wilderness and entered into the promised land, hold a great deal of meaning and importance. They are often referred to as the Shema. *Shema* is the Hebrew word for listen, or hear. And the Hebrew people repeated these words over and over again throughout the Old Testament. They were, and still are to this day, an important daily prayer in Judaism, and one with a lot of meaning packed into just a few words. The Shema is the centrepiece of Deuteronomy, and to fully appreciate it you must have a deeper understanding of what this Hebrew word “listen” really means. You, see, *shema* not only means listen, but it also means “pay attention”: Pay attention, O Israel. *Shema* also means respond, or take action, or obey.

In Hebrew, listening and doing are two sides of the same coin. You can't truly listen without also responding. You can't truly hear unless you also obey. Now, obey is a word that can come across as quite harsh: as a command that might force others to do things they aren't comfortable with, or don't agree with. It's a word that implies a potential power imbalance, rules or laws that must be followed, complete compliance. And this is absolutely true in certain contexts. But in Hebrew, the words "hear" and "obey" are the same word: *shema*. There isn't an English equivalent. In Hebrew, to say that you *shema* means you both hear and obey, or hear and respond. This is because responding to what you hear is a form of obedience. You make the active choice to listen and then respond to the truth that God is the one true God, and the appropriate response, or way to obey, is to love God with all of your being.

In the same way that *shema* is more than just listening in a cerebral way, love is more than sentiment—it is also action. In the *Shema*, Israel is supposed to respond to God's love by showing love to God in return. And just like God's love, human love is to show itself through action. We show our love for God by how we treat the people around us. And so, this is what *shema* is really getting at: listening, hearing, responding, acting, obeying, all in the name of our one true God, all in the name of love.

And this love is intense. It's not to be taken lightly. The Israelites lived in a time where your heart was believed to be the centre for many different things: it was the source of physical life, it was where you felt emotion, it was the place where thought stemmed from, and where you figured out how to make sense of the world, how to make choices. So, to love the Lord your God with all your heart means loving with all of who you are physically, intellectually, emotionally, and through the choices you make. It involves every element of your being. And most of all, it involves a response. Loving cannot be done through words alone, or listening alone; it requires action. Hear, O Israel. Hear and respond. Hear and obey. Listen and love.

When we turn to our Gospel story from Mark, knowing what we do about the *Shema*, it's no wonder Jesus replies to the scribe the way he does. In the verses preceding today's reading, Jesus has been grilled by various Jewish leaders about his beliefs, about Jewish theology, about where he gets his authority. All of these leaders are actively trying to find holes in Jesus' answers; they are seeking a reason to turn Jesus away and prove to all his followers that he is not worth following. If they can find a hole in his argument, then they can show he's a fraud. If they can point out his lack of understanding of Jewish faith and

theology, then they can take centre stage once more as the most authoritative teachers and leaders. So, when this scribe addresses Jesus, we already have a sense that everyone who approaches Jesus does so with the intention of entrapping him.

But this scribe is different. He has listened to the debates and disputes between the Jewish leaders and Jesus, and he recognizes how well Jesus answers. Whether he hopes to entrap Jesus with his question, or genuinely wants to hear Jesus' thoughts, we don't know, but he does ask difficult question: "which commandment is the first of all?"

With hundreds of commandments that the Jewish people were expected to follow, this question could easily be asked in earnest or asked as a means to entrap. Jesus' answer, though, finds common ground between himself and the Jewish leaders, including this scribe. He speaks to the rich heritage that has provided the foundation for his own teaching and ministry: he recites the *Shema*. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." How could any Jewish leader deny these words that are prayed daily and that draw forth absolute devotion, commitment, and obedience to God from every part of their being: heart, soul, mind, strength? They can't. And, Jesus continues: the second most important commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself.

The shocking part of this story comes after Jesus says those words. The scribe who confronted him carefully considers what Jesus has said. He, in fact, does what the *shema* asks of him: he listens and responds according to God's command to love. And he stands in solidarity with Jesus. "You are right, Teacher," the scribe states, "you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Through his listening, the scribe realizes that temple rituals, like burnt offerings, have their place and represent important beliefs within Jewish faith, but they are not nearly as important as loving God and loving others. And perhaps it's the suddenly obvious truth of what Jesus has said, now laid out before them, or perhaps it's due to embarrassment over been shown up by Jesus once more, but the scripture tells us that the Jewish leaders don't dare ask him another question.

You see, the thing is, these Jewish leaders haven't really been listening. They ask Jesus their questions and don't really listen to, or *shema*, Jesus' answers. Certainly they have heard

what Jesus said in a cognitive way, but they have not listened in a wholistic way. They refuse to respond or take action in a manner that truly reflects what Jesus has said. Their desire to remain in authority, to keep religious life as it is and always has been, is a greater priority for them. And the scribe who asked about the greatest commandment suddenly sees this. In hearing what Jesus has to say, he uses this common text to critique his own corner of the religious world. The scribe, in attempting to love God with heart and soul, with mind and strength, loves religion less. For the moment, at least, he has put his whole trust in the unity of God revealed in Scripture's greatest commandment, rather than in the religious practices and pronouncements stipulated by human authorities that divide. A risky pronouncement to make, given the situation, but one that leaves the listeners silent.

And the thing with listening, real listening, is that sometimes the best response is silence. Or, at least silence in terms of not speaking out loud; a reflective silence. One where we create space to think and consider the best way to respond before we speak words from our mouth, or even before we engage in physical action. How many of us have listened to someone else's story only long enough to get to the point where you can jump in with your own story? Or, how many of us have been confronted with change or with a new idea and immediately shut it down because it seems too impossible to tackle, or too strange or uncomfortable and therefore not worth the effort? How did you react when you first heard the phrase "Black Lives Matter?" Were you on board with it right away, or did you immediately respond with "Wait... all lives matter!"

I have to admit that, a number of years ago now, when I first heard the retort that "All lives matter" in response to "Black lives matter," I thought, "Yeah, all lives *do* matter." I began to wonder if maybe the Black Lives Matter organization needed to adjust their name. I even tried to think of it in theological terms; I figured God loves us all equally, so perhaps "Black lives matter" wasn't the most appropriate term to use. But then I started listening more deeply and intentionally to the voices of, not privileged white people, but Black people. And through that time of deeper listening and reflecting, I allowed my heart to be transformed in a way that helped me to really see, understand and empathize with the injustices that Black people have to grapple with each day in this country and around the world. I came to understand why "Black Lives Matter" is a strong and important statement. I began to better understand the privileges I hold and face my own racial prejudices. I'm still no where near perfect, and in fact, I never will be, because as a white woman I will never be able to fully understand what it is to be a Black person in this world. So instead, I listen to

their stories, and I reflect, and I try to respond with a heart transformed by love—not guilt, or shame, or pride, or fear—love.

Maybe it's not just Black Lives Matter that got you listening or questioning or reflecting. What was your reaction when you first heard the phrase "Defund the police"? Or #metoo? What about when you were first told that the proper and appropriate term is "Indigenous" and not "Indian"? Or when you first heard someone say that homosexuality is not a sin? Maybe you were on board right away. But more likely one or all of these examples made you come to a sudden halt. Because new and strange and different makes us uncomfortable. The key is not to ignore those feelings, but to embrace them. It is in this embracing that we open our ears, our eyes, our minds, our hearts to the ways that we can align God's love for us with our love for others and work toward human flourishing in this world.

As we take time to truly listen to God, we observe God's empathy and justice towards the afflicted, changing how we think, feel, and act. Listening can mean evaluating how we have benefitted from or participated in systems of oppression like racism or injustice, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Truly listening means being compelled to do something about it. Signing that petition instead of deleting it. Attending that protest. Speaking up and educating others. Donating our time or our wealth. Adjusting our language. Admitting when we were wrong. And recognizing that the call to listen and respond and be transformed is constant; it never ends. This is Kingdom of God work.

This is why we gather as the Church. To listen, to reflect, to respond: to *shema*. To reflect on our one true God and respond to God's unending love for us by showing our love for God. And reminding ourselves of the ways we can show that love: by obeying God's command to love one another. And we do this as a community because we have to hear different voices in order to be able to reflect. If we only hear our own voices, or only listen to the voices of those who we already agree with, we aren't responding in love; we are responding with indifference, apathy, selfishness, or even hate. We are a diverse community called together by God, and through our diversities we are called to love through listening, learning, reflecting, and responding. This is why we gather for worship. This is why we have Bible studies and book studies. This is why we have Sunday school and camp. This is why we run educational events. This is why we gather around the table for Communion. This is why we engage in forms of fellowship. Because it gives us

opportunities to listen to one another, to hear new perspectives, to reflect, and be transformed through love.

Hear, O people of the World; The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, and love others as you love yourself.

Amen

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & PASTORAL CONCERN

Hear, O God, hear our prayers,
We come to you in prayer as the summer season draws nearer to its close
And we prepare for an autumn filled with many changes:

We give you thanks for the occasions we have enjoyed this summer.
Savouring the beauty of your creation right outside our doors,
thank you for the chances we've had catch up with family and friends,
and whatever opportunities for travel, recreation & restoration have been possible.

Today we remember those for whom this summer has been difficult:
Those still isolated by Covid-19 restrictions;
Those who go hungry or face violence
in forgotten corners of our own community and around the world;
Those whose businesses are struggling,
who have to figure out how to be inviting and safe at the same time;
And those who are uncertain how to engage with friends and neighbours
and still be wise and careful in this strange time of pandemic.
May each one find courage to face tomorrow in your company.

Hear, O God,
Jesus often faced many demands and pressure from his critics,
so we pray for all those who have not found rest this summer:
For leaders trying to figure out ways forward to care for their communities
when there are no examples to follow;
For those whose jobs and responsibilities have changed,
and every day presents a new challenge;
And we also remember those all who seek work in these uncertain economic times.
May they know your strength and assurance day by day.

Hear, O God,
as the start of school comes closer
we pray for all those teachers and administrators
who are fervently preparing for the return of their students
Who are trying their hardest to make school life safe and welcoming
despite so many obstacles.
May they find support and understanding from those who surround them.

Hear, O God,
we pray for places and situations in this world
where people need healing and protection:
In Beirut, Lebanon, where people continue to recover from a great deal of damage to both
their city and its people,
In California, where wildfires continue to rage,
In Wisconsin, where the unnecessary shooting of Jacob Blake has led to more protests
against police brutality,
In the Southern United States where Hurricane Laura destroyed so many homes and towns,
In areas of the world where Covid-19 continues to spread at alarming rates.
May the people in these places feel your healing peace.

Hear, O God,
we also pray for those in our own congregation:
For Erin's brother, Jim Stone, as he continues to recover after major cancer surgery;
and we ask for your comforting hand upon Jim's wife, Tina, and daughter, Victoria.
We pray for all those who are struggling, who are experiencing grief, who are tired and feel
deflated.
We take a moment now, God, to pray for those in our own lives who need you (silence).
Through your care and love may they find healing and rest.

O God, we need the embrace of your presence, each in our own way.
Bring healing and peace to our lives and to this world you love.
Help us to listen to the voices of all those around us and to align your love for us with our
love for them.
Open our hearts, our souls, our minds so that we may offer healing and peace
to those we encounter, in the name of Christ Jesus.
Amen.