

Being Heard

Psalm 116:1-4

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, I pray, save my life!"

When I left Lincoln, Nebraska I was determined to head to the big city of Chicago. Now, I had listened to their horn laced pop hits for years and somehow associated a Saturday in the Park's jauntiness with that city. I was also determined to make a difference in the world. I wanted to be a missionary like Albert Schweitzer and help people in need. I was already told from visions my Sunday school teacher had that I had the calling, now I had to understand what that vision meant. So, I matriculated to Moody Bible Institute in the center of Chicago so I would have these two worlds. Saturday in the Park and helping the world.

Chicago turned out to be a much more complicated city than I had created in my fantasies. The band Chicago was not on every corner playing horns. This was a city that as Nelson Algren says in his long, loving poem is a "City on the take."

I had grown up literally blocks from corn fields and overnight I found myself in the biggest city in the Midwest. I was exhilarated, but also a bit scared.

Every semester each student was required to work for a local ministry or church at least one night a week. For the first semester a ministry was chosen for you as a student.

As I read the index card with my assignment, I felt a new level of fear. My card said, “Sonshine Gospel Ministries” in Cabrini Green. I had now gone from the being around farmers and ranchers to 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders in the most notorious group of projects in the entire United States.

Sonshine gospel had a building on the edge of the projects which held a gym and classrooms for teaching the Bible. The idea was that if you came to play in the gym afterschool you must also sit through our Bible study. We all prayed together and broke up into our classes on that first semester, the second semester, when all the other students had quit except me I was responsible for all three grades.

The first time I led them in prayer we bowed our head and closed our eyes and as I started praying, I heard giggles as spit wads began hitting me. It was hard being a martyr for Jesus.

There was one incident that made it clear that we lived very different lives. I tried everything I could to keep the interests of those kids on the Bible stories. Nothing worked. That white Jesus and his disciples looked too much like me on that flannel board. It wasn’t just that the stories provided by Child Evangelism Fellowship for us to teach were meant for children of the suburbs, it was that I was a child of white privilege. Yes, I had grown up often with certain deprivations of means, but I had never experienced the only life I know being filled with racism, poverty, and the only reference to your neighborhood in the press being a scourge.

So, I started changing the stories. I started making up stories that I thought were much more interesting than the ones I was told to teach. I also started letting them tell stories. Instead of it being a lecture, I let them talk freely. I quickly got the reputation of a good storyteller. Yet, I learned more from their stories. I was there to evangelize these kids, save their souls from the wiles of the devil, and they taught me much more.

What changed me? I listened.

It is hard enough to understand what goes on in the mind of someone that is close to you. Someone you grew up with, a family member, and even our partners. There is miscommunications and misunderstandings that contribute to more than one disagreement and fight. I was told a long time ago, by someone far wiser than I that I should never, “Compare someone else’s outsides with what is going on inside me.”

If it is so hard to understand someone in whom we are intimate, then it is even more difficult to understand those who have different cultures or radically different life experiences than we do.

We live in a world that wants to make each and every one of us into some type of homogeneous mold, but then we experience the diversity that God’s world provides, and we are again left puzzled.

The psalmist lets us in on a psychological secret this morning that was true thousands of years ago and is still true today. God listened to the Psalmist and it won over the Psalmist’s trust. Even in those times of despair, when the Psalmist faced death, he knows he has someone who cares about him.

We say that we are the body of Christ in this world as the church. During this time of pandemic we have been given many challenges that seem too deep to bare. Yet, one thing we have an abundance of is time to listen. That does not mean that we have been given an abundance of patience. That is a virtue we must cultivate.

We always expect the divine to listen to our prayers. God please help me in this trial, God give me this job, God if I can just win this one bet.... Yet, too often we do not practice this reciprocally in the world we inhabit.

Loneliness is said to be at all-time highs in our society church. That is something that we can readily combat by using a email, Facebook messenger, text, or the good old phone. Isolation is what those with addiction and mental illnesses are encouraged to avoid. Guess what? There are a lot of people suffering in isolation right now silently, alone. In countries opening back up are finding a higher rate of agoraphobia. An anxiety that outside of their controlled environments is too dangerous to experience. So, often they just stay in homes or apartments instead of engaging the world outside.

According to the Psalmist we have a God who listens to us. We know listening is important to our own salvation. So, if God's Spirit is among us, not listening to others misses an opportunity to hear God respond. So, listen to each other.