

Drawn In – Part 4: Listening

November 10, 2019

by Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander

Scripture: Acts 16:6-10, Special Readings

I. Randomness

Scripture: Acts 16:6-10

At first glance, St. Paul's travels in the first century seem at best, pretty random. If you take a look at the map of the region where they were, you would be hard-pressed to draw any straight lines from one city to the next. But Paul says he is listening to the Spirit during his travels and through dreams and visions he is told where he should go to preach, and places he should avoid. This means a lot of zig-zagging to get from one place to the next. Often, they would not know until after they arrived at a place, that it was "forbidden" for them to go there. Apparently, the Spirit works on its own timing.

Following in Paul's footsteps is not necessarily the best way to plan a vacation route, but for Paul and his fellow travelers, it was the only way to go. At the core of his travels, was his calling from God to preach the Good News, and that meant listening to the Spirit and letting the Spirit guide your steps. Most of us rarely take the time to listen to the Spirit's voice within our travel plans, or even in planning out our daily schedules. But this *practice* of listening for the Spirit is as important a gift to the first century Christian communities, as was his *message* about the ministry of Jesus the Christ. And it is a practice that is as important for us today as it was for those early communities.

In our present sermon series, we are exploring a six-part process that opens us up to intentionally listening to the Holy in our lives, and letting those experiences expand our creativity, allowing us to step out into life in brand new ways. We have already talked about allowing yourself to dream, and then hover over the ideas in those dreams. Last week we spoke to the risk involved in letting go of preconceived ideas and assumptions about ourselves, others, and God, in order to visualize life in new patterns and new possibilities. This week we are speaking to the importance of listening: to your community, to the yearnings that stir inside of you, and to that voice of the Holy calling you and leading to places and experiences that bring you most fully alive.

Eric spoke to this idea of listening in an earlier sermon, saying, "*...the difference between a life path that takes us somewhere and one that goes nowhere, often has little to do with a failure to Dream, Hover, or Risk, but failure to Listen once we've found our path and begun walking it. The path is never a straight line. You will almost always stray from it if you assume that you can move straight from Point A to Point B.*" Taking a look at St Paul's travels confirms this idea, and shows us that what might first appear "random" in our conversation with the Holy, might

actually be steps for creating a new pattern in which the world is being called to participate with God.

Last week we introduced Margaret Wheatley into our conversation on this discernment process. Wheatley is an organizational theorist who consults with institutions like the military and private corporations in helping them watch and listen to how the world around us self-organizes, so that their institutions might be opened to a more natural way of organizing their own patterns of being in the world. In one of Wheatley's early books, *Leadership and the New Science*, she speaks to this idea of "randomness" as she explores the science of quantum physics and the concept of "chaos theory." She writes,

When we concentrate on individual moments or fragments of experience, we see only chaos. But if we stand back and look at what is taking shape, we see order. Order always displays itself as patterns that develop over time.¹

Scientists who study quantum physics have come up with ways to track what appear to be random events, and then, through the speed of computers, they can observe the evolution of the system, and see the patterns that emerge over time. Wheatley explains this idea which these scientists have named "the strange attractor."

The system careens back and forth with raucous unpredictability, never showing up in the same spot twice. But as we watch, this chaotic behavior weaves into a pattern, and before our eyes order emerges on the screen. The chaotic movements of the system have formed themselves into a shape. The shape is a "strange attractor," and what has appeared on the screen is the order inherent in chaos.¹

Wheatley goes on to suggest that "the strange attractor" in our seemingly random lives is *meaning*. As we search for meaning, in both our individual and communal existence, we are drawn together to listen to each other and the creation all around us, that is calling to us to participate in patterns of being that may not at first be obvious. Those of us who have lived a little longer can attest that looking back, over time, we are able to see patterns emerging from events in our lives that seemed disconnected at the time, but now seem to have created an orderly path to the place where we are today. In listening to these stories within our community, we are able to envision new possibilities for our life together. And, in listening, we find ways to recognize patterns in our lives that are calling us into a fuller participation with God in the world.

St Paul and his fellow travelers took the time to listen to the Spirit as they spoke to others about how they were being called into an abundant life. Even if it meant turning around and starting in a new direction, even if it meant heading toward places unfamiliar and a bit risky, Paul listened, and recognizing the voice of the Holy in their midst, followed.

How are we doing at intentionally listening to each other and to God's voice among us? Are we able to look back through our histories together and recognize patterns that might help us discern how we are called into the future? How will the additional voices of our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, expand our conversation and add to any patterns that might emerge from being neighbors to one another?

A couple of weeks ago, Eric introduced a new initiative he is calling "Eden Tree." The purpose of this initiative is not to lay out a new strategic plan for our youth and families here at Countryside, but rather, to gather with one another, and listen to one another. Dream together. Hover a little over these dreams, and risking a clarity of vision about who we are and the context in which we are living. We will be paying particular attention for the voice of God among us, calling and leading us. **The first Eden Tree session will be held in the chapel on Sunday, December 8th at 12:30 pm with free pizza** (Since we all know the real secret to having a conversation is to gather around food)!

¹ Wheatley, Margaret J.. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* . Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Kindle Edition.

II. Choosing to stand

The outcome of intentionally listening to one another and God is unknown. But it is the certainty of our identity as children of God, who are loved beyond our wildest imaginations, that is the strange attractor that holds us centered amidst the chaos around us. Being centered, we are free to step out in unusual ways, without being able to predict the outcomes, just to explore a new possibility.

The quote from Vaclav Havel (the last President of Czechoslovakia before it became the Czech Republic), speaks to this centeredness: *"Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out."* For many of us, we find it difficult to step into new territory without being reasonable sure of the outcome of our actions. Uncertainty then, is seen as a challenge rather than an opportunity to just test out a whole range of scenarios. Another prominent writer, Parker Palmer, points out that if we are only willing to engage our time, effort, and energies in projects that we have a reasonable hope of accomplishing, then we tend to pass over projects that God is calling us into, where our work is just a tiny piece of a whole that may take generations to accomplish. By limiting ourselves in this way, we remain outside the flow of where God is trying to take our world (and us)². But by gathering together in conversation and intentional listening, we are more likely to risk a little uncertainty in order to dream about the "what ifs" of life.

The possibility of having something entirely new arise out of our conversations together is exactly the *hope* that Havel is referring to. For Margaret Wheatley, this new thing that arises is

called *emergence*. When we gather in conversation, we are not working mechanically where the outcome can be predicted as the sum of its parts, but rather it is a relational occurrence where the outcome is unpredictable and something altogether different from the individual parts. Wheatley writes,

Emergence is a process whereby interactions create something new and different that cannot be changed. Once something has emerged, it is here to stay. The only way to create something different is to start over, to begin again. ... Emergence demands a different relationship with life, where we're curious, open, alert. The only thing we can predict is that life will surprise us. We can't see what is coming until it arrives, and once something has emerged, we have to work with what is.

Our conversations together are relational. We have no idea what will happen when you put a variety of voices in the same room. It is only in discovering what emerges from intentionally listening to God and one another that we might recognize how we are called to participate with God through our ministry decisions. We need to trust in our centeredness in God's love in order to stand with each other in care and compassion, waiting for whatever will emerge from our conversations.

Hope itself is an emergent outcome, as you often are not certain what triggers it or where one's hope should be placed. In her newest book, *Who do we Choose to Be*, Wheatley shockingly states that not only are we definitely in the midst of a civilization collapse, we are actually in the final stages of this collapse and there is nothing we can do to reverse its course. We have to give up on hope! Wow, right? When I first read this, I was stunned. What would this world be like if we all gave up hope?

² Palmer, Parker J., *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers. June, 2018

As I continued to read, and sat a little while, just listening to her words run through both my head and my heart, I felt much better about what she is actually saying through this statement. She discusses the whole idea of "tipping points" in societies and says that we are well past these points in our present-day situation. It is not so different from the scientists who are studying climate change telling us that we are already past the danger zone for irreversible damage to our planet. But if we can no longer stop the course of collapse, then our conversations should stop being about ways that we can "save" our planet and our civilization, and instead should center on ways that we can turn to one another in care and compassion, helping each other through the inevitable transition we are all facing. Instead of planning rescue efforts, we ought to be setting new foundations for whatever will emerge from the collapse. How can we, grounded in God's love, begin a new environment that places *people* at

the center of all our decision-making, rather than political parties, national identities, or religious denominations?

The good news is that we are already in the midst of these conversations here on the Tri-Faith Commons. We need to take the time needed to intentionally listen to one another in these conversations. We need to participate in open and honest questioning, and challenging one another to address all the things that are hard to talk about, trusting that our relationships will continue to support us in the midst of disagreements and misunderstandings. Listening is the key to opening ourselves to a new future with one another, despite the collapse or the chaos of everything going on around us.

Another good thing to remember in the midst of the chaos, is that we are not in this alone. We have each other, and all the voices of those who have gone before us, fueling our conversations and moving with the Spirit to assist us in developing relationships of trust. Let us hear these words of encouragement from Linda Hogan, a member of the Chickasaw Nation, *"Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. 'Be still' they say. Watch and Listen. You are the result of the love of thousands."*

Listening to this, gives me a new sense of Hope.

Amen.