

### **Romans 12:2-12** (*The Message, adapted*)

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-informed maturity in you.

I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what God does for us, not by what we are and what we do for God.

In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or a cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pride-fully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply, practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of God, cheerfully expectant.

## **Finding Your Mystic: Listening Beyond the Voices**

When Bonnie and I made plans to use this wonderful Lenten Worship Series, entitled, "Listen," and follow the plans for the suggested sermon emphasis for each week, Bonnie was exceptionally gleeful at the thought that she did not need to preach on this particular topic, "Finding your Mystic: Listening Beyond the Voices." Talking about mystics and mysticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries is a rarity because the topic alone makes so many folks uncomfortable. In fact, because we speak of mystics and mysticism so rarely, a lot of people, even in religious circles, don't understand what we mean. So, let me clarify this for all of us:

First, a **MYSTIC is a person who claims to attain insight into mysteries transcending ordinary human knowledge, especially through direct communication with God, and sometimes reaching a state of spiritual ecstasy.** The word mystic is of Greek origin (*mystikos*), referring to an initiate into the mysteries. **MYSTICISM then, is a state of immediate spiritual intuition of truths which transcend ordinary human understanding or an intimate union of the human soul with God through contemplation or ecstasy.** It is the ability to be so closely connected with God that one hears or sees or feels divine truths which have been concealed from most.

Now before you develop the notion that I am getting all weird and ethereal here, I would propose that as Christians, believers in the risen Christ, we are all striving in some way to experience mysticism in our faith. After all, we espouse a faith in a three-person divine being, one of which came to live among we humans for a short lifetime, was brutally executed, and then defied human understanding of mortality by rising from the dead on the third day. Part of our faith also professes that the Risen Christ knows us intimately, sends the Holy Spirit to be present with us always, and calls us all to draw closer to the God-head through worship, learning about Scripture, prayer, and putting our faith into practice. Those basic tenants of the Christian faith alone place us on the cusp of mysticism!

So now, during this season of Lenten repentance and journeying with Jesus toward Jerusalem, the holy city where the prophets of God so often meet a tragic end, **NOW**, we are called to listen to the voices beyond our human understanding, that we know the God who saves us more fully, and understand how God would have us to live. WOW, that IS a tall order!! And yet, others have journeyed in this way before us, and we are not embarking on this journey alone! Together, adding understanding to our scriptures, building on the traditions of the past, adding insight and reasoning to our life and faith experience, we are able to hear and know and live the will of God more fully as we progress. In order to do that, however, we may need to block out the clamor and clutter of our current human experience in order to tune-in more fully to God, and in order to BE more authentically the precious persons God has created us, and saved us, to be.

That is exactly what Paul is expressing to the Romans when he says, *“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-informed maturity in you.”*

What a poignant statement. But it is more than a statement, it is a calling filled with hope that in our faith, we are not helpless and required to succumb to the immaturity, the negativity, the pessimism, the spitefulness of what is happening in this nation and in the world today. We not only have the opportunity and the support for taking a higher moral road, but, as those from whom God brings out the best, we have the calling and the ability

to inspire a positive change, based on living into Christ's teachings about God's love for humanity and all of creation.

What I propose then, as we endeavor to connect in meaningful ways with the will of God and the needs of our day, is a dual focus on LISTENING beyond the clamor of the world, and ACTING in ways that convey the truths we learn from drawing closer to God.

During the Children's message this morning, we spoke about focusing our listening on what is most important. That does not mean that we do not hear, or listen, to the less important, and the negative voices around us. But our focus is on what comes from God. That is what helps us to tune-in to the potentially mystical relationship available to us in faith. When we do not hear the negative, we "bury our heads in the sand," so-to-speak. That is not helpful, as we must be aware of the current reality in order to be informed by God about how to move ourselves and the culture around us to a better place. Yes, I have implied that we can have a positive influence on our culture. In order to do so, we must be willing to take the risk of sharing teachings and taking action that might not be popular in many situations.

Right now, there are student movements that are leading the way in this country. Have you paid attention to this? Because, when we are listening following the example of Jesus, we will listen to another perspective not to find fodder for criticism, but rather to identify the need and respond appropriately.

This coming Saturday, many whose tolerance for violence has been exceeded, will take to the streets in the "March for Our Lives" movement. I am so impressed by their Mission Statement. It reads:

*Not one more. We cannot allow one more child to be shot at school. We cannot allow one more teacher to make a choice to jump in front of a firing assault rifle to save the lives of students. We cannot allow one more family to wait for a call or text that never comes. Our schools are unsafe. Our children and teachers are dying. We must make it our top priority to save these lives."*

Now earlier this week, when some schools were participating a 17-minute walk-out on the one month anniversary of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Texas, some influential adults were asked if they would also participate or be present for the walk-out. Their response was no, this is a student movement. Yes, it is a student movement. And, for most of human history, it has been all too easy for those with power, wealth, and influence to brush aside those on the fringes who were taking a stand for justice. Too many times, we have remained silent and stayed in our homes while the foreigners, persons of color, persons of other genders and sexual identities, the impoverished, those with poor working conditions, and those who reported injustices, the aged and the very young... were simply brushed to the side due to their lack of influential

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power. I was impressed, however, when I heard about the 17 minute walk-out at one of our area school, where the principal of the school led the way! Bravo!

This coming Saturday, at the March for Our Lives in downtown Buffalo, I need to be present to listen, to support those struggling to have their voices heard, and to determine the appropriate Christ-centered action to make a positive change in our culture. (And, yes, you can come to our Easter Egg Hunt in the morning and still make it downtown for the early afternoon march!!) And for those who cannot be physically present to listen beyond the clamor of immaturity, there are a multitude of actions through which one may offer support.

As followers of the Christ of healing, love, mercy, and justice, we can no longer remain hidden in our safe spaces, just waiting to see what will happen. As we seek to unite our hearts with God's heart, and gain insight into mysteries transcending human understanding, we must be willing to step outside of our comfort zones to confront the evil of our days. Remember, Paul urged and Romans, as he instructs us, to "keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of God, cheerfully expectant."

Listen to the knock at the door. Listen to the dreams in the night. God is singing, God is singing.