

January 17, 2021

“Speak! I am listening!”

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3; John 1:43-51

This past week, I almost lost a good friend over what happened at the Capitol on January 6th.

I reached my limit on the false equivalencies surrounding the riots and protests over the summer and the attempted coup a week and a half ago.

I think the relationship is salvageable.

But I have to say,

all my training in nonviolent communication,

all my time in prayer and meditation,

all my pastoral training,

all my practice of Tai Chi, which is all about finding tension and then releasing that tension

- all of it failed me.

Reflecting on the situation with my friend, though, I have come to some realizations.

First, I realized, with the help of my lovely wife, that my position as pastor requires me to moderate and find the fine line when communicating up here.

I feel I am called to reorient the focus away from the things of humankind to the things of God, to look to Jesus.

Doing so requires me to suppress my own views on things that are happening in the world.

The problem with this approach is that it is blatantly anti-Biblical.

Pointing you, and therefore myself, away from this world is precisely the opposite of what God did with the Hebrew people and what Jesus was up to.

Throughout Scripture, God and Christ deeply involve themselves into the human situation.

The human, earthly, situation is so important that Jesus even returns *after death* to reaffirm the value and dignity of humankind and all of creation. There is a reason the most memorized verse in Christianity is

*“For God so loved...what did God love?...THE WORLD!”*

So I have realized over the past week that my approach has been at the service of a peculiar personality trait that I have:

I will position things so that I can avoid conflict and argument,

but will assert things where I know I can win the argument if it occurs. There is a lot of history behind that,

but it doesn't serve the Gospel very well.

Especially now.

So second, let me tell you straight up where I stand.

My issue with so much of what is happening in the country right now has little to do with what I see as a false narrative about voter fraud.

Nor does it have to do with the surface and false understandings of call-outs against 'socialism, capitalism, or communism and fascism'. Few understand what those words mean anymore and just toss them around for effect.

No, my fear and terror of what happened on January 6th focuses on one concern  
- racism.

The problem with the movement behind the coup attempt is that people who may not be committed to overtly racist ideologies and policies, or even know they are supporting racist ideologies and policies, are associating directly with people who are promoting racist ideologies.

Several images stand out for me:

-- *A man (they are all white) wearing a t-shirt with the symbol 6MWE on it.  
6WME stands for "6 Million Wasn't Enough".*

-- *A man wearing a "Camp Auschwitz" sweatshirt with the phrase "Work will make you free" underneath an image of barred windows.*

*If you have ever walked under the gates that say "Arbeicht macht frei" at a concentration camp, you know you are walking into a deep pit of darkness and horror.*

-- *The confederate flag flying for the first time in American history in the Capitol building, the emblem of government sanctioned slavery from the secessionist Confederate Army, who lost, and lost hard, in the Civil War.*

-- *and people hanging white power flags from the balcony rotunda in the Capitol.*

I am against this absolutely.

It is pure evil.

And if you associate with these ideas, you are courting the forces of Hell, no matter how many times you bow down before the Cross to justify your association with the people who support these ideologies.

And I can only assume that if your view of the present situation requires you to associate with racist ideologies and professed Nazis, the views you are seeking to enforce, enact, and ensure are also racist and tyrannical.

In our reading today, Nathaneal, a teacher of Israel (that is what "sitting under a fig tree" means), says,

*"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*

when Philip says,

*"I have seen the Messiah! It is this guy from Nazareth! He is the real deal!"*

Back in Nathanael's day, racism wasn't a thing.

Why?

Because the idea of race was created in the late 1700s in order to justify the brutal and horrific colonization ideals of Britain and then trucked through as the most false scientific creation that has caused the most harm in the modern world.

“Race”, as Americans think of it, does not exist, except as a political construct designed to assume power and control.

And in that regard, it is very, very real in its impact and effect.

In Nathanael's day, race was meaningless and didn't exist.

But what was a thing in Nathanael's day was a thing that also exists today - the need we have to discriminate against people.

Philip seems struck by this, especially since he has encountered the Son of God, who explicitly does not discriminate.

Or rather, let's correct that -

God does discriminate against those who discriminate against God's Creation.

This past week has changed how I read this story.

I suspect Philip may have been a little shocked at the engrained and facile discrimination coming out of his friend's mouth.

All he can say in response is,

*“Well...Come and see. Maybe that will alter your opinion.”*

When Nathanael does “*Come and see*”, he is immediately entranced by Jesus. In fact, Nathanael is the first to declare directly to Jesus who Jesus is.

*“Rabbi! You are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!”*

Today, I think what is happening with Nathanael is that he is free for the first time in his life from the burden of discrimination.

He is free for the first time from passive hate and lazy assent to oppression. Even Jesus is surprised at the rapid transition.

*"Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?*

*You will see greater things than these."*

Philip says “*Come and see*”,

but really what Nathanael is doing is listening carefully and, as a result, his eyes and vision are opened because of what he hears.

This past week, the day after my situation with my friend, I got an invitation to be a part of a webinar on “*How to Talk Across Boundaries and Barriers*”. One of the speakers was a man named David Brubaker. David is a professor of Organizational Leadership at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia.

His thesis project was on Polarization, and he has studied the nature of polarization around the world.

He said there are two causes in every country that is polarized:

- Economic inequality, and
- Identity threat

Both feed on the other.

In terms of economic inequality, the extremes have never been greater in the modern world. The distance between what most of us have and are able to do with what we have and the top 5% in this country is beyond astronomical.

Many of us are fortunate in what we have as Americans, but what we have in no way detracts from the needs and suffering that happens in many places around the world. Economic inequality and lack of access to resources as a result is a direct threat wherever it occurs.

Once that resource and economic gap is in place, it is easy for power hungry political leaders to take advantage of the people.

One way they do that is to prey on fears.

And the great American fear is that someone who is not like you or me will gain access to what you or I already have.

At the beginning of the 20th century, America was 87% white.

By the end of the 20th century, America was 75% white.

By the middle of this century, 25 years or so from now, America will be less than 50% white.<sup>1</sup>

Before we go any further, let me remind you once again,

“white” is a political designation designed to ensure access to power and privilege.

It has no biological meaning, other than a reaction to the amount of melanin in your body, which determines skin color.

Here is my analysis of what is happening in America right now.

I am going to be blunt, then we will talk about how to talk about these things.

I think white people are terrified of people who aren't like them becoming equal to them.

I think white people believe that equality means the loss of power and access.

I think white people fear people of color and so are easily manipulated by power-hungry totalitarians who suck up money and power for their own purposes.

Agitation is the friend of the dictator.

Fear is the bedmate of tyranny.

Despair is the foundation for all political and religious discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prb.org/americasracialandethnicminorities/>

It is in the best interest of power brokers to make sure agitation  
fear  
and despair  
are constantly present in your mind.

Hate breeds hate, and that is why Nathanael is so ecstatic upon meeting Jesus.  
All that fear,  
all that hate,  
all that dread of "the Other"  
evaporates in the promise of God's love for all people  
and all of creation.

So what are we to do?

I am not sure I am the best person to ask.

I am reactive.

I am a hot-head with some of these things.

I don't know how I would respond if someone showed up in the church or at my house  
with a 6MWE shirt on.

Today, this week, I suspect I would be in jail right now.

I have exactly zero tolerance for such things.

But we are going to have to figure it out.

We are going to have to have the difficult conversation if we want to avoid a constant  
swarming scene of

violence,

rage,

and fear.

Part of Samuel's training as a prophet was a simple lesson, but it is a difficult lesson.

It takes both his teacher and Samuel himself three tries to figure it out.

That simple lesson is *listening*.

*3:7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.*

*3:8 The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.*

*3:9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.*

*3:10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

How does Samuel come to know the Lord?

By listening.

It is a simple lesson, but very, very hard.

We hear through the sieve

of our experiences,

of our ancestral history,

of the history of where we live,

of our beliefs,

and what others have said about what we are listening to and for.

To really hear, though, is an act of submission and obedience.

In Biblical Hebrew, the word for listening, or hearing, and obeying, is the same word.

That is because listening is a particular stance we take in relationship to God and Creation.

Someone who understood listening very well was Abraham Joshua Heschel, an Hasidic Rabbi, who listened to the plight of black people back in the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1963, Heschel was invited to speak at a conference on Religion and Race, along with Martin Luther King, Jr.

After they both spoke at the conference, Heschel met Martin Luther King, Jr. and they became close friends.

Heschel was at the front of the protest, arms linked with MLK, at Selma.

Heschel was present with MLK in Montgomery and throughout the Civil Rights movement.

At his talk Heschel said,

*Race as a normative legal or political concept is capable of expanding to formidable dimensions. A mere thought, it extends to become a way of thinking, a highway of insolence, as well as a standard of values, overriding truth, justice and beauty.*

*As a standard of values and behavior, race operates as a comprehensive doctrine, as racism. And racism is worse than idolatry.*

*Racism is satanism, unmitigated evil.<sup>2</sup>*

After telling people at the conference that,

“God is one, and (that means) humanity is one”, and,

“God is either parent of all people, or of no one”,

and affirming the equality of divine dignity inherent in all created beings, Heschel asks a powerful question.

It is a question that requires listening like Samuel listened, and it requires a truly difficult thing:

to humble oneself to the story of another.

Heschel’s question to us today is:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1963-rabbi-abraham-joshua-heschel-religion-and-race/>

*What have I done today  
to alleviate the anguish,  
to mitigate the evil,  
to prevent the humiliation of my fellow human being?*

History, Heschel says, has made us all neighbors.

And so we must learn to love the world in the way God so loved the world.

Somehow, the professed Nazis and the persons who supports racist policies are going to have to listen to those oppressed so-called 'minority' groups who are affected directly by those racist ideologies and policies.

Somehow, the people voting against their own interests are going to have to listen to the people who have been impacted by the policies they have voted for.

Somehow,  
the liberal is going to have to figure out how to listen to the conservative,  
the white to the black,  
the oppressor to the oppressed,  
the straight to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Polyamorous,  
the man to the woman.

Somehow, we have to learn to listen.

I don't know how to talk to the racist, or the follower of Nazi ideology.

I know from history they would just as soon see me dead, justifying their violence with some policy initiative they embrace.

The reality is, though, that hate and despair is what would be responsible for my death.

To quote Thomas Jefferson,

*"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just".*

Jefferson, by the way, kept his mixed race children enslaved,  
and spoke this quote in direct relationship to slavery.

He was right to tremble,

and so should we when our attention begins to inhabit the same world as policies  
and ideologies of race and hate.

My prayer for us today as a country and community would be that we would all listen to the disciple Philip, just for a moment,  
and *"Come and See"*.

I pray that we trust the Lord does in fact want us to love our neighbor,  
and that the vision of Revelation,

that all people from all lands will gather at the foot of the Lord's mountain, is a real and true  
thing we wish deeply in our hearts to come to pass.

And I pray that we may say, with Samuel to the person who stands before us, one who is a  
beloved being of God and Christ,

**Speak! I am listening.**

Amen.