



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 12, 2017
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
LISTENING ALONGSIDE: ECHOING CHRIST

Listen for the Cries Genesis 12:1-4a; Matthew 4:23-25

Frank Rogers is a runner and a lover of dogs. When his fourteen year-old dog died, he wanted to spread her ashes along the trail in the wilderness park near their home where they ran together nearly every day. Early one morning he drove to the park. Having only a short time to accomplish this task, he despaired when saw that both the parking lot and the overflow lot were full and the street on both sides was lined with cars. Driving along, hoping for a spot to open, he spied one space in front of a house on the corner of a cul-de-sac. He whipped into the space, noted a sign that prohibiting parking at night, and jumped out with the vial of ashes in his hand. This is how he describes what happened next:

I . . . looked up, and immediately started to backpedal. Barreling down the driveway toward me, rakes raised in both hands as if fending off a grizzly, a large man of Middle Eastern descent screamed at me with accented aggression.

“What’re you doing?! You’re parking right in front of my house!”

I instinctively yelled back, “What? I’m not doing anything wrong!” I pointed to the sign. “It says so right there.”

“You’re right in front of my house!” he yelled, jabbing his rake. “My bushes! My lawn! My property!”

“But I’m on the street!” I insisted. “I’m not touching your property! Really. It’s totally legal to park here.”

He scowled as if wanting to spit. “You’re not going to help me, are you?” he scolded. “Fine! The hell with you! With all of you!” And he stormed back into his house.

Stunned by what had just happened, Rogers got back in his car. A flood of feelings washed over him: fear, anger, shame, indignation. He thought about leaving the car there and doing what he had come to do. After all, it was a public street and he was not in the wrong. He also thought about finding another place to park, but that felt cowardly and demeaning. He sat for a moment and calmed down. He realized he wanted to be respectful to this man but not out of shame. He was frustrated with how he had reacted

and wanted this man to know he was not himself a reactionary hothead. He got out of the car, walked up to the house, and knocked. The man answered, but was guarded. Rogers continues the story:

"Sir," I said. "I am really sorry. I just reacted a few minutes ago and was not really listening. I can see that it bothers you to have cars so close to your yard. I'm happy to move mine. I just wanted you to know that I understand, and I'm sorry for not hearing it before.

He eyed me, still skeptical.

"People park here all the time," he reinforced. "They don't care that it's somebody's home. People live here."

"I'm sure it's frustrating," I said. "I didn't realize. I was in a hurry. My dog died. She loved that trail. I just wanted to scatter her ashes, then get back home."

He eyed me some more, something softening. "Your dog died, huh?" he said. I nodded. "Yeah. We had a dog too. It was killed in the fighting." He looked off, as if remembering. Then he continued, softer still. "You know why I hate the people parking in front of my house?" I didn't.

He sighed. "We're from Iraq. Baghdad." He shook his head. "Sometimes the people, they parked their cars in front of our apartment. One day, one of them explodes. Right in front of our house. Not twenty minutes before, my six-year-old girl is playing on that street. We come to America. Now she can't sleep. Each morning, she looks out, cars parked in front of our house even here. She begs me, but what can I do? Tell me, what is a father supposed to do?"

Suddenly, instead of two men fighting—one a homeowner, the other a runner, one an Iraqi, the other an American—they were two fathers talking about their children, searching for peace and hope in a world seemingly bereft of both.¹

How did Jesus do it? After his baptism and wilderness experience, he was off like a shot, like a televangelist on steroids. Matthew tells us that after he walked out of the wilderness and discovered that his cousin John had been killed by Herod, Jesus moved to Capernaum, started choosing his disciples, and then began preaching, teaching, and healing all across Galilee. He was

¹Frank Rogers, Jr., "Learning Compassion," *Weavings* (November 4, 2015); available online at: <http://weavings.upperroom.org/?s=Frank+Rogers>.

like a first century Elvis. Wherever he went, crowds flocked to him. They came from the hills, the valleys, the cities, and across the rivers. They came to hear him teach. They came to hear him preach. And they came lame, blind, deaf, mute, and sick with all manner of diseases. They came weary and wounded with every malady of the heart. And he taught and preached and healed them, always saying and doing just the right thing. How did Jesus do it? In the chaos of mass humanity and human need, how could he even hear what those people wanted him to do?

I think he did exactly what Frank Rogers did after that Iraqi man chased him back to his car with a rake. He paused and then he listened. "Hardness of heart," writes Elizabeth Canham, "is a refusal to listen."²

There is a lot of noise in our world and a lot of people crying out for help. How do we not turn a deaf ear? How do we hear what they really need? How do we listen to the cries?

I think back to Jesus' time in the wilderness about which we know very little. We are told that he fasted for forty days and was hungry. I can understand that. I get hungry if I go four hours without food, sometimes less! What else went on in the wilderness for those forty days before the Tempter even arrived?

I think Jesus spent a lot of that time listening. If you remember the story of the anechoic chamber that I told you last week, you know that if you were able to remove every bit of external sound, you would still hear two things: the sound of your nervous system at work and the sound of your blood circulating, the work of your heart which sounds a lot like a knock. I think Jesus listened first to himself. Perhaps he thought over his life, the stories of his unusual birth, the time he camped out at the temple with the scholars, the ordinary life he lived in Nazareth, and the growing awareness of his larger purpose.

I suspect he listened to the prophets and poets of his faith. Jesus was well schooled in the Hebrew scriptures and his time in the wilderness offered ample opportunity to pay attention to what God had said through the men and women who trusted him. He remembered that God's promise to Abram was that he would make of him a great nation through which all the families of the earth would be blessed.

²Elizabeth J. Canham, "Listen with the Ears of Your Heart," *Weavings* (September/October 1995): 8.

I think Jesus also thought ahead as he pondered what was in store for him. Obviously by this time he had a sense of his calling and mission. He knew that he would preach and teach and heal. He also knew that he would head toward Jerusalem where his mission and his opponents would collide. He must have thought about the possibilities of suffering and death and what those experiences would be like. I think Jesus spent some time listening to his own life.

Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic Priest, Spiritual Director, and caregiver of people often tossed aside by the rest of us. Out of his study of Christ's life, his work with people disabled in many ways, and his own suffering in life, he came to understand that we are better able to care for one another when we are aware of our own needs as well. "Wounded Healers" is the term he coined to describe people who are able to use their own struggles and suffering to take care of other people who are experiencing struggles and suffering.

Jesus is the true wounded healer. Writing in anticipation of his coming and the redemption he would offer, Isaiah wrote, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). While he was in the wilderness, I think Jesus pondered the suffering he had witnessed as a child and young adult and the suffering that would likely be his as a mature man. I think he thought about the sadness that he had experienced, the grief that had come into his life, perhaps in the death of his father Joseph, and the anxiety he had known firsthand trying to provide for a family in a hardscrabble world.

I think Jesus thought about the ways a community can be vicious toward someone who doesn't fit in or follow the rules. Surely over the years he had seen caravans pass by with riches only imagined in Nazareth and slaves who were forced to do the bidding of men who thought they owned them body and soul. He certainly knew the terror imported by Roman soldiers and the sick feeling that came with realizing you were little more than a captive in your own land. And surely he recalled the feelings that welled up within him when he heard rabbis and Pharisees berating people for not following the letter of the law when he saw no evidence of the spirit of the law at work in their own lives. Hopefully he also reminisced about celebrations he had enjoyed, weddings and births and bar mitzvahs that brought laughter to life and song to the heart. Jesus listened to his own life out in the wilderness so that he could better

listen to the lives he would touch in the communities throughout Galilee. His own woundedness, past and future, became the source of his ability to heal.

We do not always react to being wounded by offering to heal someone else. John Mogabgab, a deeply insightful Christian and writer, once mused,

To be human is to be wounded . . . As the weight of injury settles upon us, our wounded heart may become a furnace of resentment and revenge, ready to inflict pain in return for what it has suffered, or striving perhaps to unburden itself of the pain it has borne. But there is another possibility: that our heart, wounded by the boundlessness of human agony, grows tender and alert to the wounds of others. Then our wounds become portals of vulnerability through which the pain of others can enter our lives, awakening us to a more generous sense of our common humanity and discovering in turn refuge, consolation, and healing.³

Jesus knew firsthand this tension that exists within each of us. When he was arrested in the garden by a lynch mob bearing arms and Simon Peter grabbed a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:52-54). Through his own impending wounds and death, Jesus opened the portal of the heart of the divine so that we might be healed and given life. It is this choice, this option to choose healing over wounding, forgiveness over revenge, and life over death that sets humanity apart from the rest of creation.

A couple of months ago, columnist Thomas Friedman wrote an opinion piece in *The New York Times* in which he explored the rapid advance of technology and how it is changing our lives. He noted that "machines and software are not just outworking us but starting to outthink us in more and more realms." For perspective, Friedman turned to his friend and ethicist Dov Seidman who pointed out that since the scientific revolution of the 16th century, we have assumed that what sets humans apart from all other living things is our ability to think. However, he said, the question before us now is "What does it mean to be human in the age of intelligent machines?" What

³John S. Mogabgab, "Editor's Introduction," *Weavings* (September/October 1998): 2.

makes us unique, Seidman said, “is the one thing machines will never have: a heart.”⁴

I think that Jesus spent his time in the wilderness before he began his ministry listening to his heart. He heard not only the rhythm of that marvelous organ which reminded him that he was human and alive; he also heard the echo of his heartbeat which is the beating of God’s heart within us. Jesus listened to his own experience and to the experience of God through the ages with all of the joys and heartbreaks God had shared with his human children—with us. Only by fully understanding his humanity could Jesus identify with our humanity. Only by acknowledging his own wounds could Jesus see our wounds.

Fresh off of that experience, Jesus was brimming with energy, excitement, and compassion, so he was fast out of the gate and soon moving through Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing. He was responding to human need.

We are called to do the same things, but only by walking alongside Christ as he traverses the hills and flatlands of Palestine can we watch what he does. Only by listening alongside him as he hears people asking for help and grace can we learn to hear people ask for help and grace. Only by listening alongside him as he heals the blind, gives new strength to the lame, restores health to the leper, and offers dignity to outcast can we learn to do the same. Only by listening alongside one another can we discover the needs of other people. Allow me a local illustration.

Our neighborhood, like many others in town, has a watch group that communicates by email. Over the past few weeks, there have been incidents of auto and home break-ins. There have also been sightings of a young man in the neighborhood who is known to many people. Apparently he has a drug addiction and criminal record and may even be responsible for some of these crimes. Members of the watch group began reporting every sighting of this young man and disparaging things were constantly being said about him. Finally, someone in the group suggested that instead of only being critical and suspicious, the community might also want to offer help to this man. Suddenly, the tone of the messages changed and ideas about offering food, clothing, and resources for shelter began to be shared. Instead of angry and

⁴Thomas L. Friedman, “From Hands to Heads to Hearts,” *The New York Times* (January 4, 2017):A21; available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/opinion/from-hands-to-heads-to-hearts.html?_r=0.

fearful comments, compassion began to take hold in cyberspace. As technology enabled the community to communicate and remain safe, it also took on some heart as people began thinking of the needs of this man instead of their own needs alone. Someone listening alongside Christ heard the desperate cries of this individual over the fearful cries of neighbors and decided to act with heart instead of head alone.

Practically every day we make choices about where we will park our lives. Will we only look for places that are convenient for us or will we consider that God might just open a space in someone else's life so that we can park there a while and offer help and healing? Will we hear only anger and fear or will we listen for the common cries of humanity that are so familiar to us? Will we listen alongside Christ to hear the real needs that we share with one another?

Until we allow our hearts to have a voice in the conversations we are having in our world, until we begin listening to the people we say we want to help, fear and frustration will prevail. When we listen alongside Christ, however, we hear the language of the heart and we understand. Amen.

March 12, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this season when our spiritual focus is turned inward, O God, we become uneasy with the realization that you see us as we really are and know us completely. Our actions and opinions are often short-sighted because they grow out of regret for the past, a need to control the present, or fear of the future. Where our perspective is limited or we lack clarity about decisions or purpose, we often fail to put our complete trust in you.

But we have the assurance that you are our Creator who discerns our thoughts and the deepest longings of our hearts. You speak to us in the stillness of souls and through our encounters with your world. You share our joys and know the dark places of our lives that we would rather hide from you, and you often meet our needs before we are even aware of them. We are grateful, O God, that you comprehend all that we do and all that we are, and yet, you share with us out of the abundance of your blessings. You know our hearts, and even still, you bestow compassion instead of condemnation. For every expression of your grace, especially for the amazing love you have given for our sake, we offer our thanks and praise.

We know, O God, that in spite of our limitations of resolve and resources, you have entrusted the care for this world and for one another into our hands, promising that you will supply our needs. Help us to see all the ways that you are at work in our world, especially in small broken things, in the meek and poor, in the vulnerable places where we would not think to look for you. We confess that our busy schedules and myopic agendas often prevent us from recognizing the wonder and delight that are all around us, so open our eyes to be surprised by beauty in unexpected places and to grasp the wonder of your presence. Our frantic pace of life and the noise with which we fill each moment often drown out the ways that you speak to us, so open our ears to hear the whispers of your Spirit around and within us.

Grant us the vision in this season of Lent and beyond to look deeply at our own lives while seeing the rest of your children through your eyes of compassion. Teach us to look at those whom we might judge or about whom we make assumptions as your beloved children and the neighbors we are called to serve. Help us to recognize in every face we see, every circumstance we encounter, every possibility that is ours, your Spirit who is at work, empowering and transforming us and all of creation. Grant us the grace to listen alongside one another, Holy God, that we might hear the tender beating of your heart and there find new life.

In the name of the One whose life, death and resurrection have given us a vision of joyful and abundant life now and eternal life with you, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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