

First Friends Church, A Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
May 23, 2021
Cutting through the Noise
Acts 10:44-46, Psalm 98:4, I John 5:2, John 15:17

Psalm 98:4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

I John 5:2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.

John 15:17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Message

In the past two weeks I spoke about two abundant gifts: people who influence our lives, and advice. Today I want to ask how we can cut through the noise that can get in the way of all that, and abundantly listen for the Spirit of God.

Can you relate to any of these situations? An important meeting is scheduled but another group calls an emergency meeting at the same time. Someone comes to complain about a problem they have with what someone else is doing. The phone rings while you are already on a call. The dog needs to go on a walk while you are in the middle of making dinner. The neighbor next door starts a construction project involving both a drill and an electric saw. A friend lovingly shares a lot of extra food that no one in your house can eat. You forget your wallet on the way to a dentist appointment 45 minutes away, have no money for co-pay or to put gas in

the car, and the needle is on maybe- just- enough to make it home. The music in the waiting room is so loud you can't hear the receptionist or even think to complete the forms. After a long day of having to do things not on your list- your list of things to do is still full, a "relaxing" TV show actually winds you up, and it is time for bed. And the pandemic shut down airplane travel but now the noisy flights are back over the house every night. Lots of everyday noise!

I am sure you could add to the list. Noise Happens. So much so some days the advice of the Psalm, "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises," falls on my deaf ears. I can't hear myself think much less listen to the Spirit. It is difficult to listen when I cannot hear; when there is too much noise, when it just won't stop. How can I listen?

Many churches celebrate today as Pentecost. The Christian story celebrates it as the day a sound like the rush of violent wind came, tongues as of fire appeared, and the Spirit filled all the disciples who spoke in other languages. Devout Jews from every nation heard them speaking in their own language. It was a cacophony of sound. How were they able to hear?

First, they came prepared and anticipating. These devout Jews came from all over the world to live and worship in Jerusalem. They prepared to observe Shavout/ Pentecost- 50 days after Passover. They remembered and acknowledged that God had set the people free from the Pharaoh in Egypt and gave them the

commandments. And they celebrated God's continuing presence, in the desert accompanying them in a pillar of fire and smoke and in the five books of Moses. They heard the good news proclaimed by the disciples in their own language because they came prepared, remembered, acknowledged and celebrated. They were shocked, surprised and amazed but listened when God spoke in a new way.

But today's reading from Acts is not about Pentecost. It takes place on Peter's trip to Caesarea in the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and it is not Jews who hear the disciples speak in tongues. It is Gentiles who extoll God and Jewish disciples who hear them speak in tongues. The disciples had been dubious of Peter's mission. They were not prepared and did not remember, much less acknowledge or celebrate anything God did among the Gentiles. They were shocked, surprised and amazed, but they listened when God spoke in a new way. This time, listening did not require preparation just being present to hear.

As I tried to prepare this message I ran into a dead zone. I knew Spirit had a message for me to give to you, and suspected even more for me to hear. I kept asking, "What am I supposed to say?" But then I realized the point: no matter how much I asked, I wasn't listening for an answer. Then two things happened.

The first was our Meanderings and Ponderings group met on Wednesday night. We are studying the book 40 Day Journey with Howard Thurman. This week Howard pointed out, "God is here. In the midst of life, breaking through the

commonplace, glorifying the ordinary, the Great, High God is near... Do not wait to hear... Spirit winging near in... great crisis, do not expect [Spirit] riding on the crest of deep emotional excitement... or at the ...moment when something abnormal or spectacular is at hand. Rather find God in the simple experiences of daily living, in the normal ebb and flow of life as you live it.” We had a deep and fulfilling time of sharing experiences of both when we are discouraged from, and when we find God in the “nooks and crannies of life.”¹

The second experience happened at 2:45 am the next morning. That is when I woke to hear the dog stretching to be more comfortable, an owl hooting in the tree outside my window, and Diana Butler Bass speaking exactly what I needed to hear through her writing. My mind finally made time to listen to God.

Diana tells the story of a monastery in California filled with monks living in silence to listen to God on the top of a remote hill. Fleeing a disastrous wildfire they were led by Spirit to shelter with a convent they could see down in the valley. When time came to rebuild, the two communities were instead led to sell the land on the hill and merge. They created a teaching and retreat center in the middle of the noise and everyday events of the city to listen and serve God’s people together.

Diana also writes about a radical change in the concept of God. It is reshaping individuals, their view of the world and actions. They are turning away

¹40 Day Journey with Howard Thurman, pg. 26.ere

from institutional church that teaches and acts as though God is limited to a throne in the heavens. They are turning toward Spirit that is all around, with people caring and praying for others and working for a better world. God is no longer an “omni” God- all powerful, present and knowing, but an integral God- entwined in everything in space and time. God in stars and sunrises, the face of the neighbor, acts of justice, and the wonder of love. A God that links with us, and is the interstitial tissue connecting us with each other and all of creation.

Diana says relocating God has sweeping personal, political and social consequences.² But God has always been doing this, from pillars of fire and smoke to arks in the holy of holies, from inside of the disciples to inside of the Gentiles. God has always been and is eternally, imminently present Love.

So how do I apply this in all the noisy moments of life? I think it is less about turning off, and more about cutting through and listening more deeply into the noise. There is noise we hear with our ears, noise in our bodies from the stress of our busy lives, noise in our hearts when people challenge or cause irritation within relationships, noise in our spirits distracting us from listening, noise in our minds spinning full of stuff. The question is can we listen abundantly in that mess?

Yes- by relaxing into it because I realize we can find God is speaking in and through all of it. While I might only talk to God once a day or once an hour, God

² Grounded, Diana Butler Bass, Introduction.

speaks all the time through everything all around me. Yes, God can speak in a voice I hear in my head. But Spirit also shouts beauty in the roses prolifically blooming everywhere I walked this week. Spirit sang generosity in the food shared by my neighbor. God whispers compassion into my heart as I listen to a person complain about another's actions, (then gives me words to guide them back to speak kindly to the offender, restoring relationship without me in the middle.) God counsels patience and fills my mind with images of the joy of the success of the neighbor with the loud construction project. I see God in, and hear Spirit speak through the receptionist who calms my wallet-less, dentist-fearing self in the joyfully blaring music of the office. And even and especially with that person whose behavior makes it difficult to see that of God directly. Because while I know it is incredibly difficult; if I do listen abundantly to them I will hear God's still, small voice deep in them, and God's Spirit will sing in me.

I found this advice helpful in answering the question- How do I cut through the noise? "Success is achieved by putting the simple truths we know into practice."³ It is up to me to let go and abundantly listen.

³ Assata: An Autobiography, Assata Shakur