

“Praying to God and Listening to Others” by Joan M. Dodge

May 8, 2016



Seventh Sunday of Easter

First a confession...I've been struggling with how to put the many pieces of this sermon together in some logical form...Over the last few weeks, there have been moments of clarity and then fog sets in. So I ask myself, how does what I want to say about the John passage, and two books that have been important to me recently fit into a coherent whole. I think my latest sense is that it is all about **loving relationships and prayer**...our relationship to God the Creator through Jesus; our relationship to each other within the Seekers community, and into the wider community; and our relationship to our own feelings, interests, and anxieties. *So bottom line*, its all about relationships and knowing from these that we are loved and taking the time to pray for All. So I'm starting with the ending BUT wanted to share with you how I got there and some questions on my way. (I always seem to have many more questions than answers when I jump into these issues).

Let's start with the Gospel reading from John 17 for today which takes us back in time to the night in the upper room and just before Jesus and the disciples departed for the Garden of Gethsemane and the events of the crucifixion and resurrection were to unfold. It was the final supper that Jesus celebrated with his friends and followers. While in earlier passages in

John 17, Jesus prayed for Himself and for his immediate group of disciples who were with him and followed him, the verses 20-26 for today is a prayer that Jesus made to God for all the believers yet to come. It is a prayer by Jesus for us...Seekers today... And it is a prayer for Unity or Oneness.....unity with God and unity with Jesus who is the Christ. Our verses for today are Jesus's hopes, and gives a picture of what we as his followers are to be to Him, to God and to each other. This prayer reminds us that this oneness or unity is about God's love for us and our love for each other as we are part of a greater whole. These verses are a prayer to God by Jesus for our relationship of love with God in an on-going way. It is a prayer and a promise by Jesus the Christ that love becomes the basis for our unity.

I don't know about you, but the the concepts of *Unity* and *Oneness* in today's world seem so far away and so impossible to attain for ourselves... for myself. We see and experience disunity, disharmony, and divisiveness around us every day whether in our political parties, our Congress, our own families, our various groups, or churches, and even within ourselves. Somehow, I feel much more comfortable with the notion of disunity or conflict than that of unity...more comfortable with many competing forces rather than a sense of oneness. Whenever I read these passages, I have to confess that I'm always asking myself...Yes... but **How do I get there—How do I get to a place of oneness? How do I move past the sense of differences to be a part of a community and to be a person of unity and love? How do I learn to love God and others? Questions...always questions...**

A Caring Community

Shifting now to an individual and book that have been important to me over the years is the book, [The New Community](#) by Elizabeth O'Connor. For those newer to Seekers and its parent organization of the Church of the Saviour, Elizabeth O'Connor was the writer/scribe for many of the historical and spiritual activities of the church in its early life. In 1976, Elizabeth struggled with this issue of church unity in her book which has recently been re-released. Elizabeth, herself, was a short, thin woman who walked and talked fast, having lived for some time in New York city. I met Elizabeth in the School of Christian Living Mission Group and we discovered an interest and comradery around mental health care—she was interested more in adult mental health care while I was into child mental health. Both of us liked

questions of “How” and “Why” related to scriptures as well as life issues and we enjoyed a relationship of pursuing our questions and finding answers with each other. This period in the early 1970s was a time when the concept of mental health treatment within small psychotherapy groups was just beginning. Because of that, Elizabeth and I both wondered if the principles that operated in small therapeutic groups to help persons transform their lives wouldn’t also operate within small church structures like mission groups. Elizabeth was always searching for the “How” or the “Why” of a spiritual truth and seeking to make the spiritual journey real and relevant for herself as well as others.

Elizabeth wrote in her book’s first chapter, “The primary purpose of the disciplines, structures of accountability and mission of the Church is to build life together, to create *liberating* communities of caring” (p.9)

I love that phrase...“liberating communities of caring”. This first chapter in *The New Community* is so very personal for Doug and I as it is about our first daughter, Jennifer, who died after a sudden diagnosis and surgery for a brain tumor. Elizabeth wrote of the oneness felt by the church at that time of Jenny’s dying—“As we waited, prayed together, shared our hopes and our fears, looked once more at our own deaths and fought for the healing of a child, we moved in oneness in Christ.” (p.8). It is a beautifully written chapter of both the community’s journey into oneness, its relationship of persons with each other, and also Jenny’s story as part of the community.

I invite you to read it for yourself. Also feel free to ask me or Doug any questions or comments that come up for you. It’s been many years but our feelings of love for Jenny are still alive.

Later in her book, Elizabeth outlines what she identifies as the five marks of a liberating (could we say nowadays “the transforming”) community—those marks include the following commitments—a *radical commitment* as she says:

- • A commitment to the poorest, the weakest and most abuse members of the human family
- • A commitment to a life of dialogue
- • A commitment to critical contemplation of one’s own life and the life of one’s faith community

- • A commitment to a life of reflection
- • A commitment to structuring into everyday a time of solitude and to understand one's aloneness.

Although these marks are separated out in order to describe them more deeply which Elizabeth does, the reality is that all five are interrelated and interdependent with each other and are essential to being in relationship with God and Christ; as well as with others in our community and wider communities; and with ourselves.

I feel drawn to work more deeply with all of the marks of a transforming community because I think they might help ME answer the questions:

“How” do I, Joan, become more caring within a community that seeks to be a community of love? Am I really committed to a life of dialogue? How do I express my commitment to the poor these days? How do I understand my time of solitude and of aloneness? Questions...Questions...

Again, I invite you to read for yourself these descriptions and work with their meaning for your life.

The Listening Life

Elizabeth's marks of a transforming, caring community necessitates a commitment to listening. Elizabeth states that “dialogue requires a clear, radical, and arduous commitment to listening.” (p.103) and “True listening requires that we not only listen to words, but also pay heed to feelings and acts.” (p.103)

That brings me now to a recent book that I have found helpful called, [The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction](#) by Adam McHugh who is a minister in southern California. He outlines many of the complexities of really listening to God and others.

McHugh states....“Listening ought to be at the heart of our spirituality; our relationships, our mission as the body of Christ, our relationship to culture and the world. We are invited to approach everything with the goal of listening first. We are called to participate in the **listening life**.” (p. 14) *I love that term, the “listening life”.*

In talking with others, he recommends that “we ought to tread carefully and gently, and focus on *hearing the hearts*, not just the words of people in our lives.” (p.138).

McHugh points to some important questions to ask ourselves before entering into a conversation with another...a few that I can immediately relate to include:

For what purpose do I enter a conversation? Is it an opportunity to express my opinion? Am I seeking attention? Do I try to entertain for the other? Am I trying to convince others that I am likeable or attractive? Do I have an agenda?

While some of the book is obvious and things that most of us have all heard about in a number of contexts before, I think the author raises some good points about the importance of having a listening heart and offers some specifics in the how to do that with each other. I know that I want to have a listening life for myself, others, and God but don't always know how to do it.

Lastly, McHugh also reminds us that our conversations with each other happen in communion with the Spirit and are prayers. I especially like that idea that all of our interactions and relationships with others and with God are prayers.

Questions...How do I become a person with a listening heart? Who has really listened to me in my life? Who have I been listening to in my immediate world?

Prayer

It seems that the five marks of a transforming community and possessing a listening life all require a deep-rooted dedication to Prayer—prayer in the sense that I am both listening and responding to my inner self, prayers for others, and prayers to God the Creator through Jesus Christ.

Jesus's prayers in the chapter John 17 is a prayer in three sections—Jesus prays for himself in verses 1-5, He prays for the immediate group of disciples that are there that evening in verses 6-19 and in verses 20-26,

Jesus prays to God for all those who would become believers in Him. Jesus shows me how I can be in closer relationships to God, others and myself by praying for all.

As I've gotten older, I've found myself doing more praying, particularly in situations that I feel little hope of changing. Praying was not part of my background or spiritual life even as a marginal Presbyterian, but something that I've learned here in this community—in places such as Dayspring, or Seekers worship services or Women's retreats. I'm finding that as I look back over my lifetime, that praying for others and praying to God has become a vital response to my own feelings of inadequacy to change things or "do something."

I also find praying scary as I'm not really sure all that God has in mind for me but I do return to his quiet voice of "Trust in the Lord."

So there are some thoughts...Jesus in his prayer to God for us that last night was asking for God to grant us (you, me and the descendants) the gift of unity and love.

Jesus knew that this love had to be based on a caring relationship with God the Creator or Father was through Him and the Holy Spirit.

Through Jesus's pray for us we have been reassured of our relationship to God and with each other. We need to hear and pray for each other with a listening heart and have a deep commitment to being a liberating and transforming community of people that care deeply for each other and for our divided and divisive world.

I need to work at my commitments to becoming a part of a liberating community and I pray for an increased capacity to listen and love. Amen

References

Adam S. McHugh, [The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction](#)
[The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction.](#) (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 20015.)

Elizabeth O'Connor, [*The New Community*](#). (New York: Harper and Row, 1976)