

Hearing Each Other into Speech
Sunday June 9, 2019 – Shavuot/Pentecost

Reading: from *Beloved Image* by Nelle Morton

It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that I first received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: "I hurt... but... I don't know where to begin to cry." She talked on and on. .. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one moved. No one interrupted. Finally she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. "You heard me. You heard me all the way." Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: "I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story." I filed this experience away as something unique. But it happened again and again in other such small groups of women. It happened to me. Then, I knew I had been experiencing something I had never experienced before. A complete reversal of the going logic in which someone speaks precisely so that more accurate hearing may take place. This woman was saying, and I had experienced, a depth of hearing that takes place before the speaking – a hearing that is far more than acute listening. A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech –a new speech—a new creation. The woman had been heard to her own speech.

While I experienced this kind of hearing through women, I am convinced it is one of those essential dimensions of the full human experience long programmed out of our culture and our religious tradition. In time I came to understand the wider implication of this reversal as revolutionary and profoundly theological. ... Hearing in this sense can break through political and social structures and image a new system. A great ear at the heart of the universe –at the heart of our common life— hearing human beings to speech—to our own speech.

Do you ever listen to StoryCorps? Every Friday morning National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* broadcasts a person telling a story from his or her life. These stories are recorded all over the country and cover the full range of human experience – I've heard fathers telling children how they met their mothers; former students telling their former teachers what they meant to them; soldiers telling about their war experiences in Germany, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In honor of Pride month, on Friday the storyteller was a gay man in his 80's telling his husband about how he learned to be proud of who he was. The stories, like our

lives, all differ, but they have one thing in common (actually two – the first being that it's good to have a tissue handy when you listen). The second is that even when two voices aren't broadcast, there are always two people involved, one to tell the story and the other to invite it to be told. And often at the end of the story, the speaker says, "Thank you. I've never told this to anyone before." Without the person hearing, the story might never have been told.

Hearing each other into speech. Had you thought about this as a spiritual practice before? Usually when we think of spiritual practice, we think of emptying ourselves of thoughts, words, and desires, as in the practice of meditation, that we might receive wisdom, insight, or peace. I at least tend to think of those qualities as already existing in some pure form waiting to be poured in to my receptive space, but what if those qualities don't exist out there somewhere? What if it is our very receptivity which brings them to birth?

Today Jews and Christians are both celebrating holy days which invite us to think about holy listening – H-O-L-Y – and listening wholly – W-H-O-L-L-Y. In the Jewish calendar, today is Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. Originally Shavuot was a harvest festival celebrated 50 days after Passover, but over centuries it evolved into a celebration of the gift of the Torah, or the Law. The festival remembers the time when the ancient Israelites had fled slavery in Egypt and were now 50 days into their sojourn in the desert. This is the time when their identity shifted from being slaves running from Egypt to being a nation moving towards the Promised Land. This is the time they became a people.

As the book of Exodus tells the story, they were camped near Mount Sinai and Moses went up the mountain to open his ears to the voice of the Eternal. He returned to the people and told them that they also should prepare themselves to hear that voice. So for three days they prayed and fasted – they put aside their daily concerns and opened their hearts and their minds to receive deep truth – and on the third day, there was thunder and lightning and Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke and out of the smoke, and the people heard ten words to live by.

And it was thousands of years later on another Shavuot that tradition holds the Christian church came into being, and again, by listening, a scattered people became one. In that story, fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, his friends were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot, also known as Pentecost, Greek for 50 days. Jews from all over the known world had come for the festival, and suddenly each heard the wisdom and example of Jesus being proclaimed in his own language. They asked:

Don't all these people come from Galilee? How come we can all hear them speaking our own native languages? Some of us are Parthians, some Medes, others Elamites. There are people visiting here from Mesopotamia, Judea and

Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the Cyrenene occupied parts of Libya. There are immigrants from Rome, both ethnic Jews and converts. Some here are even Cretans and Arabs! But these Galileans are speaking all our languages and telling us about the extraordinary things God has done.

Usually when this story is told in Christian celebrations of Pentecost the emphasis is on the power of the holy spirit speaking through the disciples. But the disciples couldn't possibly have been speaking all those languages at one time – no one can speak two languages at once. The miracle wasn't in their speaking, but in the hearing. Having made themselves receptive to hear again the Torah, the people gathered in Jerusalem heard into speech a new gift of utterances from the Eternal. As Nelle Morton wrote later on in her essay *Beloved Image*, "The Pentecost story reverses the going logic and puts hearing before speaking as the work of the spirit."

And this is a reversal of our usual model. In our Protestant tradition especially we tend to put on a pedestal – literally – the one who speaks. But how could I, or any other preacher, speak if it weren't for you who listen? And you do more than listen from the pews on Sunday morning, for as she prepares her sermon, the preacher contemplates those who will hear those words and what they might need to hear this week. And sometimes even in the speaking of it what was going to said changes because of the power of the hearing.

But our church community is about more than your hearing me into speech. It is about each of us hearing one another into speech so that each of us may realize the piece of the truth we hold and offer it to our common life. It is about each of us offering to each other a holy space to move towards wholeness. As the Unitarian poet e.e. cummings wrote, *We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust... Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.* We sometimes do not believe we have a word worth hearing until someone invites us to speak it.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever found yourself on either side – saying something you did now know you knew, did not know you felt, but something which needed to come out? Have you been on the other side, the one who through your generous silence helped to birth that utterance? Did you feel the holy power of that connection?

Church is a place to practice that generous listening, so that we can offer it beyond this safe circle to people who are not so like ourselves. For as the ears of the spirit brought together Jews of different countries and concerns long ago in Jerusalem, so today still the ears of the spirit can bringing together people who

don't know themselves connected, people who think they have nothing to contribute, people who otherwise would remain silent.

In that StoryCorps episode on Friday, the story teller, Alexei Romanoff, told about going to rent an apartment with his lover in New York City in the 1950's. At the time, men who wanted to live together worried that a landlord would reject their application if they made clear their relationship, so they would say that they were brothers. But when the landlord asked Romanoff what the relationship was between them, he remembered an older gay man who had been a mentor to him when he was in his teens. The mentor would say, "When you're ready to leave this Earth, as I am, if you haven't left your community in a better place than you found it, then you haven't lived." "And I wanted to live," Romanoff said. So he replied, "He's my partner and my lover." His partner's face blanched, sure that they were about to lose the apartment and shocked that Romanoff had told the truth. But the landlord just said, "OK. Here's the key." And Romanoff ended by saying that like his mentor, he wants to make others proud of who they are.

His story reminds us that many people today still aren't free to speak their truth. They aren't free to express their pride in who they are. Though we've made progress on welcoming differences of voices, identity, and perspective into public discourse – think not only of Pride but of the #Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movements, Pentecost and Shavuot invite us still to ask both whose voices we still need to hear into speech and what parts of each of us still need to beheard.

For the voice of the holy doesn't just thunder down from Mt. Sinai. It doesn't just speak through the voices of clergy or gurus or Zen masters. The voice of the holy is within each of us, waiting to be spoken, waiting to be heard. Each of us can offer the sound before sound needed to hear and receive; each of us must be offered the chance to speak into that silence. The ancient Israelites heard Yahweh into speech. Those gathered to celebrate Shavuot thousands of years later heard Peter and the other disciples into speech. And the speech they heard changed the speakers and the spoken to. Listening and speaking can't exist separately. We must hear each other into speech.

How might you be changed by offering the holy silence of your listening to another? How might you be changed by being heard into speech about your wholeness by someone? How might the silence and the speech reverberate through this church? How might the holy words sound through our world?

I invite you into silence now before our final hymn.

-Pamela M. Barz

