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## Hineini, Part Two<sup>1</sup>

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church  
"Pray": Listening as a State of Being*

How many of you were aware that President Trump came to the Twin Cities this week? How many of you had feelings about that? How many of you think that the feelings you had about it are probably fairly close to what most of the people around you were feeling? How many of you think your feelings were different than most of the folks around you? How many of you are sick of hearing about President Trump? How many of you think we don't talk about what is going on in our country enough? How many of you had stuff going on in your personal life that took more of your attention and energy than the political scene in our nation and in our city? How many of you think there are other issues going on in our city and country and world that aren't getting enough attention because of how much the country is polarizing around politics? How many of you think the country polarizing around politics is urgent and must be addressed? How many of you would like to preach under these conditions?

Where is God in all of this?

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<sup>1</sup> I already preached a sermon called "Hineini" at St. John's on February 10, 2019, which can be found [here](#). This is an ongoing conversation about that word and its relationship with prayer.

We are returning to the seven practices of the Way of Love, and the practice we are exploring today is prayer. Under the conditions the world is in, prayer is a controversial subject. When we say, “I’ll pray for you,” or when we offer prayers for immigrants or the earth or LGBTQ rights, are we just praying to ourselves feel better instead of engaging in real action? I was going on a run with my sister a few weeks ago, and she was talking about everything going on in this world, and saying, why actually should we pray? What does God do, what CAN God do, and if God can do something, why isn’t the world in better shape than it is?

I have another question for you, and as always, this is a shame-free zone, so I’ll ask your honest answers. How many of you have ever tried to have a daily practice of prayer? How many of you have ever in your life prayed? When you pray, what is it that you really want to happen? I’d like to take a minute here to pause. You’ll notice that on the front cover of your bulletin the question I just asked is written. Please take a moment to think about your answer. Eventually I’ll ask you to write it down and put it in the offering plate, but please keep this question fresh in your minds.

In the lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures for today, in the First Book of Samuel, we hear the iconic story of the boy Samuel serving God in the temple, being called by God, but not recognizing that it was God who called him. The country Israel during the time of Samuel was in a state of chaos and violence and corruption. The book of Judges says that during this time “there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” The priest Eli was in charge of the temple at Shiloh where Samuel served, but Eli’s sons Hophi and Phinehas stole from the peoples’ offerings and took advantage of the women who served at the

temple. The religious and political affairs in the country were disordered, and there was corruption at the highest levels of authority. Sound familiar?

And into this environment of chaos and violence and corruption, God calls a young boy in the temple, by name. The boy is young enough that he is still listening, and open to learn. So he hears God, but understandably does not recognize that it is God calling him, perhaps because visions were rare in those days as the text says. He does however answer correctly. “Here I am,” he says, in the iconic words with which every prophet in scripture responds to the call of God. The Hebrew is “Hineini.” Here I am. Eventually, with Eli’s help, Samuel learns that it is God speaking, and he is instructed to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” The name Samuel means either “listening to God” or “God is listening.” Once God has Samuel’s attention, God speaks a word of judgment against the corruption in Eli’s house, and affairs do not continue as they had been. Samuel becomes the prophet of God, and through Samuel, the people eventually appoint the first king of Israel.

So change, systemic change, begins in this story with prayer. It’s prayer that is initiated by God. It’s prayer that involves a young boy learning to listen to God and recognize God’s voice. I suspect that when most of us think of the word prayer, we think of asking God for something. And that’s not wrong. Jesus tells us to ask God for things in today’s gospel text from Luke. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.” But what if prayer is not only about speaking and asking, but also about listening? What if God is already speaking to us?

What if prayer is about training the mind, like exercise is about training the body? What if prayer is about training the mind to walk through the world in a posture of listening to what God is already doing and speaking?

There is a wonderful book that I've mentioned to you all before, written by an Anglican priest and physicist named John Polkinghorne, called *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*. In it he asks, Can a scientist pray? He talks about how the universe is incredibly, exquisitely sensitive and supple. In my limited non-scientist's brain, I understand him to be saying that causality is incredibly complex because literally everything that happens in the world impacts everything else. And in such a world of complex causality, neither we nor God can simply pull a string to make something happen like a puppeteer manipulating a puppet. But we can align our will with the will of God and thereby give God greater room to manoeuvre. Polkinghorne compares this to light rays. He says that in a room like this, the ambient light is created by light rays all moving in random directions all of the place. But in a laser, all the light rays are moving together, and they create incredible power. Prayer is like that; it is aligning our will with the will of God as individuals and as a community. When that happens, things become possible that would not otherwise be possible.

Consider whatever problem is most troubling you these days in your personal life or in the life of the world. Think of the ways you understand that issue, the story that you tell yourself about it. What if the way you understand that, the story you tell yourself about it, is like a field? When you pray, you are expanding the field, allowing cracks to appear in it, that give room for God to change the story.

Or, think of the world as an enormously complex causal weave, like a tapestry. If you pull on one string, you will pull on the whole thing. But now imagine that the tapestry is immersed in liquid, and praying is like inviting drops of grace to infuse and change the entire thing.

There are countless tiny and enormous stories that we could all tell about what happens when you pray. But for purposes of us, here at St. John's, on October 13, 2019 in the Twin Cities, I'd like to invite us to really engage prayer as a communal practice. Obviously, we pray when we come together each Sunday. I'd like to invite each of you to interact with the field of what we are doing here with even more intention. How well are we listening to God and to one another? And when each of you goes home, would you be willing to try some form of daily prayer?

I am a runner, as many of you know, and I know about training my body to be able to do things it could not previously do, by the simple fact of consistent practice. The same thing is true for training the mind and heart through prayer. I would love to see the people of St. John's, myself and everyone here, deepen our intentional practice of prayer as individuals and as a community. I believe that God's will is always for healing and reconciliation and life. And that through prayer, we can make room for God to manoeuvre through us and our actions in a way that would not otherwise be possible. For me, the single word that captures all of this intention to be available to the will of God in thought, word and deed, is the word *Hineini*, the Hebrew word that means "Here I am, God," the word Samuel used to respond when God called him.

So when President Trump speaks about Somali Minnesotans in a way that assumes the rest of Minnesota did not want them, as he did on Thursday, we can respond, *Hineini*, here I am, God. We do not need to feel stuck in helpless outrage. We can hold the entire causal weave of the history of our nation towards people of color and immigrants, and our own place in all of that, in prayer. We can seek to align our will with the will of God, and make possible what would not otherwise be possible, so that we can do our small part to work for justice and reconciliation and to welcome the stranger, since we were once strangers. When youths strike to demand that adults do something about climate change, we can respond by saying, *Hineini*, here I am, God. We can pray, seeking to align our wills with the will of God, and becoming open to changing our daily practice and our policy making. When we encounter people we deeply disagree with, we can train our minds to refrain from jumping to reactivity or hatred or fear, and seek instead to assume that always and everywhere, God is already present, and that we can listen for what God is doing and cooperate with that. *Hineini*. My prayer for us as a community is that the intention *hineini* will resound through our awareness and practice like a heartbeat. That we will begin to understand prayer, not only as the act of asking God for something, but the practice of listening for God that permeates our lives so deeply that it becomes a state of being. Amen.