A Fast From Too Many Words

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given February 22, 2023
Ash Wednesday, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Today, Ash Wednesday, is the beginning of lent, that great 40-day spiritual pilgrimage the church makes every year to reset our intentions and actions, to become aligned once again with the will of God for love and healing in this world. It's the most introspective time of the year—a time to shine a flashlight around in the deeper parts of our being, and thoughts, and practices, to be honest and to become open to God's power of transformation.

Traditionally, people give something up for lent. This is an effort to creatively follow Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, upon which lent is modeled. Jesus did this just before beginning his public ministry. It signaled that something was ending, and something else was beginning. Sometimes people give up alcohol or chocolate or video games. How do you decide how to practice lent for yourselves? First, if we look at Jesus' teaching in today's gospel reading where he says to take care about your motives for why you are fasting or praying or giving alms, I think we are being invited to get deeply in touch with our intentions. What is it that you really want, this lent? What do you think God's Spirit wants to birth in you? How can your practice align with that intention?

And second, here are some suggestions from Pope Francis about the kinds of fasting we might consider during lent:

> *Do you want to fast this Lent? Fast from hurting words and say kind words. Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. Fast from anger and be filled with patience. Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope. Fast from worries and trust in God. Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity. Fast from pressures and be prayerful. Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy. Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others. Fast from grudges and be reconciled. Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.*

As I was pondering for myself what I felt most inspired to do for lent, how I felt I might cooperate with what God's Spirit is already doing in me, I felt led to follow Pope Francis' last suggestion: to make a concerted effort to speak much less in order to listen much more, both to human beings and also to the natural world and to God. Let me explain why.

Contemporary author Brian McLaren has recently written a book called *Do I Stay Christian?* The book is divided into three parts: a "No" section explaining why one might leave Christian faith; a "Yes" section about why one might stay; and most importantly, a "How" section about making either choice in a way that promotes healing and the greatest good for the whole earth.

In the "how" section, he has a chapter called "Re-Wild" in which he talks about connecting with the natural world for many reasons. He says this:

> I have a theory. When our ancient ancestors developed the capacity for language, words became … not only our primary way of engaging with others socially, but they also became the tool by which we each

> conduct our own inner dialogue. Language became so powerful … that the web of words in our heads often felt more real to us than the web of life outside our heads … What can jolt us out of our addictive obsession with the virtual reality of language? The answer may be as close as our own front doors. If we take our bodies outside and into the natural world, if we go far enough and return often enough and stay long enough, we can let our inner beings realign with the original language and architecture of creation.[1]

There is another reason to fast from words and to listen more, especially across lines of difference. That reason is that there is so much about our current culture and even our faith that is steeped with centuries of the distortions that come from power and cultural dominance. I think it is sometimes hard for people who look like me to tell the difference between what is healing and loving in our faith and what has caused so much harm, because we have not had the experience of those who are marginalized.

Why would speaking less and listening more help with this?

A book called *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* by Kent Nerburn tells the story of a Native American elder named Dan who asked a white man named Nerburn to write a book about Dan's insights in a way that white people could understand. I'm going to read a fairly long section from it to you, and I hope you will forgive me, but I cannot duplicate the insights from this elder. So here it is:

[1] Brian McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?* (St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2022), at 177-178.

Dan said, “We Indians know about silence... In fact, to us it is more powerful than words. Our elders were schooled in the ways of silence, and they passed that along to us. Watch, listen, and then act, they told us. This is the way to live.

Watch the animals to see how they care for their young. Watch the elders to see how they behave. Watch the white man to see what he wants. Always watch first, with a still heart and mind, then you will learn. When you have watched enough, then you can act.”

“That’s quite a bit different from our way,” Nerburn volunteered ….

“Yes,” Dan said. “With you it is just the opposite. You learn by talking. You reward the kids who talk the most in school. At your parties everyone is trying to talk. In your work you are always having meetings where everyone interrupts everyone else and everyone talks five, ten, or a hundred times. You say it is working out a problem. To us it just sounds like a bunch of people saying anything that comes into their heads and then trying to make what they say come around to something that makes sense…

This is a lot of the reason why we Indians make white people nervous, Nerburn. White people like to argue. They don’t even let each other finish sentences. They are always interrupting and saying, `Well, I think….’ To Indians this is very disrespectful … if you start talking, I’m not going to interrupt you. I will listen. Maybe I will stop listening if I don’t like what you are saying. But I won’t interrupt you.

When you are done I will make my decision on what you said, but I won't tell you if I disagree with you unless it is important. Otherwise I will just be quiet and go away…But this isn't enough for most white people. They want me to tell them what I think about what they are thinking, and if they don't agree with me, they want to talk more and try to convince me. You don't convince anyone by arguing. People make their decisions in their heart. Talk doesn't touch my heart. People should think of their words like seeds. They should plant them, then let them grow in silence.

Our old people taught us that the earth is always speaking to us, but that we have to be silent to hear her. There are lots of voices besides ours…For me this hill is so full of life I can never be quiet enough to hear all the voices.

Nerburn said, "Do you mean real voices, or sensations that seem to have meaning?"

Dan said, "I mean real voices. They're not all people or speaking our language, but they are voices. Listen."

I heard the buzzing sound of locusts and the distant, rhythmic call of some kind of bird.

"Do you hear that bird?" asked Dan.

I told him I did.

“Do you know what he is saying?”

“ I don’t speak bird,” I answered.

“You should,” he twinkled. “Learn a lot. The birds are `two-legs’ like us. They are very close to us. He is calling to another. He is saying it will rain soon.”

“You can tell that?” I said.

“Yes, and I can tell that the wind is switching to the north and we will soon have colder weather.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just do,” he responded cryptically. “It’s in the voices I hear. I can understand all the trees. The wind, all the animals. The insects. I can tell what a color of the sky means. Everything speaks to me ….These are things my grandfathers taught me. I hear them too. My grandfathers. I hear their bones under the ground… When I get over one of the graves I have a feeling insight me. It’s like a shiver. My grandmother had it, too. She said that our ancestors gave it to us, and that I should always listen.”[2]

[2] Kent Nerburn, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* (New World Library, 2002) pp. 80-85, selections.

Let us have a minute of silence, to absorb this teaching. What is arising within you in response to what you have heard? Where is God in this for you?

Language and ideas are not bad things. They are powerful and can be beautiful and transformative. What I believe the Holy Spirit is asking of the church is to become more balanced, to correct the distortions that have come from over-emphasizing one part of our being which has permitted the neglect of the rest of who we are and the abuse of other kinds of people and of life. It's like we've had really developed muscles in our biceps and shoulders but really scrawny legs and backs and everything else.

This lent, let us begin to listen to the voices of other people and to other life forms. Let us listen to what our ancestors have to teach us. Let us stop trying to hang onto our own thoughts, waiting for a break in the conversation so that we can interject what we have to say, and not listening until that moment arises. If our thoughts are important enough, they will come back. Let us become a clear pool of water, uncluttered and deeply attentive to what God is trying to say all around us, in the earth and sea and sky. Let us particularly listen to all those who do not have power. To Indigenous brothers and sisters. To communities of color and immigrants. To children. To birds and trees. To the beloved communities around us whose voices have been silenced for far too long.

Let this lent be a time for us to become open to God's healing, to repentance and new life. Let all that needs to end, end. Let that which needs to be born in us begin. Amen.