

Sermon: The Rhythm of Love
6 Easter, Year C
Acts 16:9-15

Emmanuel Church, Staunton
Shelby Ochs Owen
May 26, 2019

“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly.”

Last week I had the privilege of using my continuing education time to go to SSJE, Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopal Monastery in Cambridge, MA, next to Boston. There I spent several days with the nine or ten monks in the regular rhythm of monastic worship, four or five times a day and the rest of the time I spent in silence. Guests like me are assigned to a small, simple room with a bed, a table and chair, a lamp, a prayer desk and an icon. The best part about the room was the view of the Charles River where lots of crew teams were hard at work rowing in their racing shells, even as all of the cars were whizzing by on the highway by the river. The monastery is an oasis, a place of prayer and quiet, in a bustling city.

One of the most striking aspects of the worship time was the strange rhythm of the chanting. The monks make it clear to all guests at the beginning of the week, that we need to be mindful of following the monks as *they* set the tone and the pace of the singing. We'd sing the first half of a line of a psalm, for instance, and there would be this *long* pause or rest before we moved on to the next phrase. (singing) “God is our refuge and strength* (long pause) a very present help in trouble.” Some of us who aren't used to singing with these long rests found it a bit uncomfortable, if not painful, to slow down and to listen, anticipating when the monks would come back in.

Slowing down can indeed be uncomfortable in this fast-paced world. In some ways it's fun and exciting to move quickly from one activity to the next, to move from one news feed to the next, from one email to text to Facebook post. It can make us feel so *important* when we are engaged in so many realms of life. But busyness can take its toll on us. And self-importance needs to be checked. Unrelenting busyness can cause health problems and relationship problems. It can increase our anxiety levels and make us short-tempered. Some have said excessive busyness means we are hiding from God and from our deepest selves. We can become numb to the most important messages of life. Being too busy can cause us to stop listening: stop listening to our bodies, stop listening to our hearts and minds, stop listening to our spouses, our children, our friends, stop listening to the needs of the poor and marginalized, and most significantly, we stop listening to the Holy Spirit.

In our reading from Acts we witness the rhythm of the Holy Spirit. Through a vision in the night the Apostle Paul hears and sees a man telling him to come on over to Macedonia to help the people there. So Paul and his fellow travelers get up and go, convinced God has led them to share the good news of Jesus. They move on from Troas, go straight to Samothrace, on to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi. They were on the move! Busy. Busy. Busy. No small thing, traveling in first century Roman territory! But then they were still. On the Sabbath day, the day of worship and rest, they went down to the river, supposing it to be a place of prayer. And in that place of prayer and rest, which could have been a synagogue or an informal place of worship, they encountered Lydia, who *listened* to them. The text says, “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” As a result of that encounter, Lydia was converted as a follower of Jesus. Could it be that Lydia was *available* to God because she had slowed down and in the stillness and the quiet was actually able to listen to what Paul was saying? And she was able to listen to God's voice? And then able to respond with joy and enthusiasm by taking part in the way of Jesus, the way of love.

The rhythm of our life in God matters because it helps us better love God and love one another. We need the ebb *and* flow. We need the stillness *and* the activity so we can more fully participate in God's mission. No doubt, as a dealer in purple cloth in Thyatira, a center of production of purple dye, a luxury

good, Lydia was a busy woman! She probably had a great deal of economic and social standing, but what seemed to be at the heart of her conversion experience was an ability to listen, an ability to be quiet. She must have had some sense of the importance of the rhythm of being busy, *and* still.

In music we have notes and rests, right? Even though the Cambridge monks' musical rests can seem a little too long, the notes in music in general would lose their meaning if there were no rests. And there would be no music if it were all rests and no notes! We need notes AND rest stops for music to be viable. Interrupting our busyness with periods of silence and stillness gives us an opportunity to listen. For many of us that is a frightening prospect. What will we find out about ourselves in the silence? What will we see in ourselves and in the world around us if we are truly still? Being still can be risky because we don't know what will bubble up that we have to deal with. My sister and I joke about how, after a busy week, when we are finally still, it's like having "the bends" as you come up from deep water too fast, and it's actually kind of painful before it feels good! The good news is that God is with us guiding us and loving us all along the way.

In a few minutes we are going to pray for the renewal of wedding vows for Susan and Doug Peyton. Susan and Doug have been married for 35 years. A few months ago when they witnessed a marriage of some of our own church members, they were inspired to do this. Doug felt that as they were married in a Baptist Church, he'd really like to renew those vows in an Episcopal service. What they have found over the years is that love changes, love deepens, and that what they think is important changes as well. What has been consistent in their lives together is their faith in God and their devotion to one another. We all know that being in a life-long relationship is not always easy. There are many challenges along the way. But love, in the form of commitment and perseverance, can be fruitful. In moments of stillness and quiet Susan and Doug have come to appreciate with increasing gratitude what they have. While Susan says that training Doug is not yet complete(!), what matters in their lives together is not just the big things but the little things they do for each other, day by day, minute by minute. They have been dealt some big things in recent months with several family deaths and have helped each other through them. But just as importantly is that daily rhythm of caring for each other, noticing each other, listening to each other through words and through silence.

In our opening collect, we asked God to "Pour into our hearts such love for (God), that we, loving (God) in all things and above all things, may obtain (God's) promises, which exceed all we can desire." Taking time to listen to God and to one another, whether it be a spouse, a friend or a stranger, can often be one of the best ways we can allow that love of God to be poured into our hearts. As the Holy Spirit inspired Lydia to be busy in God's mission of love *and* to rest so that she could listen, may God inspire us to be active in God's mission of love and give us the courage to be still. May we have many beautiful notes *and* rest stops in our song of love and life in God. Amen.