

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for today, June 10! Thank you so much for tuning in and taking this time out of your day to focus on God and your faith.

As we are hearing from many different places and resources these days, the fight for racial justice and the work towards a truly more equitable, life-giving, and peaceful society for all people is not something that is going to be concluded over night. This holy and difficult and beautiful work of dismantling oppressive systems and building up our fellow humans, providing support and tangible love for our neighbors, is work that lasts for a very long time. And this recognition of time is not meant to exhaust or overwhelm us (though of course there are days when those feelings come up and they are super valid). This recognition of continued work for a long time is actually exciting, and joyful, and a gift that we get to be a part of. Yes, doing the work of feeling your feelings, lamenting, learning new things, building new relationships, it can get uncomfortable sometimes. But we grow from our moments of discomfort. We grow in the times that we stretch ourselves to new places and ideas. And we grow most when we keep our relationships with our fellow humans at the forefront, especially when those fellow humans look differently, love differently, have different backgrounds, and different abilities than we do. It is the beautiful diversity of people that gives us hope for a better, just, and loving world. And that hope, that work we do for a world that brings the loving reign of God even closer for all people, brings me joy, no less than the absolute joy of new life promised to us in the resurrection. These actions, of loving our sisters, brothers, siblings in Christ, is what being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is all about.

So for the next few weeks, and even periodically beyond these few weeks, I'm going to provide devotions on how we can live into our calling to love our neighbors, with a particular focus on how we can walk alongside and support our neighbors who are different from us. I also want to say that I do not know everything, I will not always be perfect in this area, and I certainly still have lots of learning and listening to do. But I am here to listen and learn and act alongside all of you and our sisters and brothers of color. And I am committed to rooting this work towards racial justice and dismantling systems of oppression in the scriptures, in our Christian faith, and in our call to love God and love our neighbors above all else.

These devotions are particularly important in this season, as we see protests and tangible work towards changes in our world that support and uplift our siblings of color around our country, and even the world! Let us join together and do this holy work of loving our black, brown, and indigenous siblings in Christ.

Today, I'm going to talk about the holy practice of listening. And as we begin our time learning and listening, please join me in a word of prayer:

*God of power and might, of all time and place, of deep love and justice and truth, we praise you for your unending love, your promises to always come alongside us. Lord our hearts are heavy with the reality of sin in our world, specifically the sin we name before you today, systemic racism in our country. Lord, hear our prayers to call out for your mercy and peace, our prayers for justice and life, our prayers to help us deeply. Help us to listen carefully to our sisters and*

*brothers of color, and listen carefully to your words revealed in the scriptures and in our world. God help us to love you and our neighbors, radically, powerfully, in all we do. In your Son Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

As I've turned to the scriptures for insight and comfort lately, I've been fascinated by the prophets. The prophetic books in the Old Testament are filled with poetry, words of God revealed to God's faithful people, and those words of God are given by specific named people, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. The best description I've read about the power of the prophets comes from the commentary in the Lutheran Study Bible, this is written by Walter Bouzard on pg. 1089-1090: *"The prophets called their listeners to return to a faithful relationship with God, especially as that was defined by the covenant of Moses. Often, the prophetic message included a specific call for rulers to repent from unjust social practices that allowed for the oppression and economic exploitation of the poor. The prophets had an ability to imagine the world not as it was but as God would have it be. They called their listeners to share that vision."*

The basis of prophecy, the power of prophecy, is holy listening and the shared vision of God's reign.

The calling in prophecy has two parts - to go where and when God calls, and to speak what God has revealed to the prophet. There is showing up, and there is listening. There is context, and content. Prophecy did not happen in a bubble, isolated away from the realities of the circumstances. But God revealed God's words to these prophets for the sake of what was happening to the people in a specific time and place. The prophets listened, to God's words revealed to them, listened to their fellow people, listened to the kings of Israel of the time, and then took action. They listened, and took action.

What endures about the prophets is how carefully and powerfully the people of Israel listened to them. The prophets teach us the power of listening. They knew that the prophets had power and wisdom in bringing God's words to them, and the people were shaped by their listening. The words the prophets proclaimed spoke directly to the people, and assured them that God was with and in and among them, even in the trials of war, separation, violence, exile, and a host of other painful situations.

Some of the most powerful and enduring verses that we find comfort in, verses whose truth and power has remained strong for these thousands of years, come from the words of the prophets. Though the prophets spoke into their specific time, there is human and divine truth that comes from these words and endures in all of our human hearts and spirits.

Let's hear from the prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 29. The first verse gives the specific context of his words - it says *"These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the*

*people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” Helpful to know. But here’s what has truly endured from this letter, verses 10-14:*

*For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

Those words endure. These words speak to the promises and truth of God in our world. These words have provided thousands of generations of people with comfort and strength amidst unimaginable hardships. And these words have the power to bring us to a more loving and just world.

But in order for that loving and just world, for all people, to come about, we have to listen to our sisters, brothers, and siblings and hear what their world is like. Hear their perspectives on what life is like. And truly listen to hear them. Not a false listening that is followed up with corrections or commentaries or just for the sake of argument. But we have to listen, deeply, to hear and begin to learn what life is like for people different from us. And sometimes that listening is painful, because it hurts to hear that our fellow humans are suffering and in such pain. But it is in the holy listening, this beginning, that we can start to make changes to heal and bring the peace and promises of new life in a just world with our neighbors.

Prophecy is about listening and living into a shared vision of God’s reign, for all people, not just the way we think it should be. We can know what tangible things, what actions we can take, to bring about the radical love of God by first loving our neighbors by listening to them. Affirming their truths. Hearing their experiences. And from that place of listening and knowing, to God’s words in the scriptures and to our brothers and sisters in this specific time and place, the loving reign of God, the life abundant promised to us by Christ Jesus, will be able to truly become our reality.

So my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the spiritual practice I would love for you all to do this week is, naturally, rooted in the holy spiritual act of listening. And specifically, listen to or read at least one article, video, or book by an author, artist, preacher, creator of color. We need to practice this holy listening to our black sisters and brothers to begin to know how to come alongside and advocate for a world of justice, peace, and true, deep love and community, the very world and life that God and Jesus Christ call us to over and over again. And pay deep attention to what our sisters and brothers are actually saying, what their lived experience is. Our lived experiences are likely different in many ways, but at the core, we are all beloved children of God called above all else, to love God and one another, and we need that sense of being heard in order to feel loved.

There are lots of folks that we can listen to in this time. I will post links to a few things in the notes on this video if you'd like a place to start. And in our listening, let's be gracious and open hearted. This is a difficult and traumatic time especially for our siblings of color, and they don't owe us stories or explanations, but we can approach what has been shared with grace and gratitude. There is no shortage of voices to hear and stories to listen to, and it is up to us to honor and hear them as they are shared.

I look forward to hearing how this practice goes for all of you, and of course, if you would like additional resources or to talk about anything related to systemic racism or racial justice, please feel free to reach out. Thank you for beginning on this holy journey of listening to and loving our sisters, brothers, and siblings in Christ.

As we end our time today, please join me as we pray the words our Lord Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.*

Go in peace, dear friends in Christ. Have a beautiful day, Amen.