

Listening Deeply and Ferociously

A sermon based on *Soul Talk* by Kirk Byron Jones

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu is famous for his “Soul Talk” sessions. Even during the height of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, he would go on retreat to a monastery to do some deep listening. One day, after the apartheid system had been dismantled and Nelson Mandela had been elected to the presidency, the president had need of the archbishop’s counsel. He had his assistant call Tutu’s assistant, who said that it was impossible to reach him, as he was on retreat. Mandela then had his assistant call the monastery, where the Mother Superior told him that it was impossible to reach the archbishop, as he was on retreat. Mandela then instructed his assistant to call the catholic school across the street from the monastery to get the principal to go talk to the Mother Superior to see if he could get through. The Mother Superior stood firm. She told the president, “Sir, the Archbishop is talking to God now. You will have to wait.” Sometimes, even the president comes second.

Now, it’s a great one liner. I think we all get a little chuckle of the idea of a nun telling a president what to do, but for this morning, I want us to dare to take this story seriously. Spending time learning to listen to the deepest parts of our being sounds ridiculous to some of us, I know. Dedicating ourselves to the practice of waiting for God in the quiet seems like a waste of time to some of us, I know. And even if this is a practice that speaks to your spirit, it can seem daunting to actually set aside the time that you need to really do this work, and you start to wonder if it’s really worth it. But this story that I want us to take seriously is about a man who helped topple one of the world’s most famous systems of oppression. If “Soul Talk” helped prepare Desmond Tutu for his work then, what might it do in us today?

In preparation for answering that question, I want us to spend a minute or two in quiet, starting that process of listening. Get comfortable where you’re sitting. That might mean uncrossing legs or arms and resituating yourself. Now, notice your breathing. Don’t change it, you don’t have to take deep breaths or anything, but for the next couple seconds, focus on what breathing feels like to you.

Would you pray with me?

God, we trust that you are still speaking. We come to this place to listen. Be with us here today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Kirk Byron Jones starts off this week’s chapter of *Soul Talk* by saying, “Your soul not only deserves to be listened to, but listened to ferociously.”

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Later, he says, "To hear God is to practice tenacious openness."

Ferocious. Tenacious. For Jones, listening is a very active thing. Not only active, but directed. Focused. Pursuing. Enduring. Ferocious.

I don't think many of us think of listening that way. We sit and listen to our friends or coworkers or family while they tell us a story. We sit and listen to music or the news or podcasts as we drive. We sit and listen in church on Sunday. Most of our daily listening is hearing background noises that we don't pay much attention to.

There's not anything wrong with that passive type of listening sometimes. It's listening that allows us to save energy for the other things that need doing. If we're doing the type of listening that Jones is talking about all of the time, we might lose some of the energy and focus that we need for working or driving or maintaining our life.

But, Jones contends, the soul doesn't want to be listened to that way. Now, in full honesty, I'm not crazy about the way Jones talks about the soul. It's not as defined as I want it to be and it doesn't line up with how I understand things. I don't think we have a magical ocean of peace inside of us just waiting to whisper mysteries and truths to us and I think that how we live in our bodies and how we live with each other is just as important and formative as "soul talk." And when we do sit down to listen, I don't think we're hearing from our soul. I think we're hearing from the Holy Spirit, the source of all knowledge and peace, who knows us all the way down to our deepest depths and loves us with an unshakeable love.

Now, I do think that we all have that part of us that is most aware of the Spirit, that part of us that longs for the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and the indomitable joy of God and the unending love of God. Some of you may have watched episodes of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and you might know the song he sang, "It's You I Like." This song, for Fred Rogers, recognized that no matter what circumstances we might have grown up in or are dealing with now, there is still something of God in us. "When I say it's you I like," Rogers said, "I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed."

I think we all have that inside of us and it's that part of us that we need to turn to when we want to listen ferociously to the Holy Spirit, and different people call it different things. John Wesley would have called it our spiritual sense, the part of us that helps us understand how we love God and neighbor. Augustine referred to it as "the heart" when he said, "Our hearts are

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restless until we rest in you.” Because this part of us longs for God, it recognizes God in the Holy Spirit’s speaking to us. If I’m going to call anything the soul, I am going to call that God-focused part of us the soul.

Still, even though I disagree with Jones about the soul, he has some wonderful points about ferocious and courageous listening. I’m going to outline his points about listening to the soul, because I think they apply for how we should be listening to God speaking to us through our souls. Then, I want to talk about how we respond when we do hear something from God during our soul talk.

So how do we listen ferociously, courageously, and deeply? Over the chapter, Jones gives us five pieces of wisdom.

First, we have to choose to pay attention. We have to choose to do this type of listening and we have to choose to do it no matter what we think we might hear. Now, I think in the world we live in today, we have become skilled at not listening to things we know we won’t want to hear and not paying attention to things we don’t want to see. I do it too, especially with things that anger me or shake me to my core. But in order to listen deeply, we have to choose to listen and choose to give our full attention. Slowing down and unburdening ourselves, like we talked about last week, is a part of us preparing to give our full attention.

Second, Jones tells us to “be more questioning than judgmental.” We should “produce an inquiry where [we] would render a ruling.” I know that I am quick to brush aside an idea, waving it away with a “That can’t be right.” But the better practice when confronted with something new and maybe contradictory to something we thought we knew is to ask a question instead of pushing it away. Practice curiosity when you’re doing deep listening.

Third, we should listen with patience. I am forever rushing thoughts, ideas, and people when I think I know where it’s leading. I will finish your sentence or make a reference for you if I think we’re covering ground I know. It is not my finest habit. But when we’re trying to listen deeply, that means listening and waiting until a thought is completely formed. Listening with patience ties into his next point: Listen to understand, rather than respond. When we’re listening deeply, when we’re listening with ferocity, we will listen actively. Pay attention to everything you’re hearing. Wait for it to completely unfold, even if you think you’re a step ahead. Listen to understand what you’re hearing. When we are listening deeply, we are not planning our response.

Lastly, we have to remember that we’re only able to listen deeply at all because our worth is not in what we’re hearing but in God’s love for us. We are worthy because we are humans, beloved by a God who will never stop loving and valuing us. We can listen to something that challenges us and shakes us because our foundation in God is sure. When we know that nothing

can keep us from God's love, that nothing can take away who we are and what we're worth, then nothing that can be said to us can take us down. We can listen to everything because no matter what we hear, we will still be loved, and so we can listen freely.

So,

- (1) Pay attention.
- (2) Ask questions.
- (3) Listen with patience.
- (4) Listen to understand.
- (5) Listen freely.

Five things to remember when we're listening deeply and ferociously to the Holy Spirit speaking to us. These are also five things to remember when you're listening to anybody around you, when you have the energy to listen to them deeply, because if the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us and speaking to us, then the Holy Spirit is doing the same thing with those around us. We might be able to hear God through someone else, too.

Now, our New Testament readings today tell us a little bit about how we should respond when we hear something from God that does not sit well with us. First, we have Jesus, telling his home synagogue that this good news he's going to proclaim, this year of the Lord's favor, isn't going to be just for his people, for the good people in the synagogue. It is for the Gentiles and the Jews. These people are so angry at this hard truth that they literally try to throw Jesus off a cliff. These people are his friends, his family, everyone he grew up with and still, his words made them so angry they wanted to throw him aside and kill him.

Sometimes, we will hear hard truths like that when we're quiet and listening to God. God is always opening the door of our understanding of God's love a little wider and sometimes, what we see scares us. It's not what we expect. What do you mean, I have to love drug addicts? They're liars and thieves who are wasting their lives and ruining others. What do you mean, I have to love prisoners? They've killed and raped and stolen and done other horrible things. What do you mean, I have to love someone who's mentally ill? They're literally crazy. I can't know what they're going to do. None of this is safe. None of this is smart. No, God. No. I'm throwing this out.

But our holy words don't tell us to be like Jesus' family in this story. No, our holy words tell us to love. When we hear something challenging, we should love. We should be patient. We should be kind. We should set aside the parts of us that are prideful, because they are stopping us from loving as we should. We should rejoice in the truth. We should bear along with hard truths, always hoping, always enduring. This doesn't mean that we'll always fully understand.

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We see things as in a mirror dimly, but we are promised that one day, we will know fully, even as we are fully known.

So when we hear something hard bubbling up, we have to love it. We have to listen deeply to it and learn from it. We have to let it change us. Because nothing God is ever going to say to us is going to harm us. It will only make us more loving, which is the whole reason why we talk to God in the first place.

Desmond Tutu would go be with his soul once a month, listening deeply to God. He knew that he needed the renewal of these times, because listening deeply is life-giving too, and, as Audre Lorde said, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation," and for Tutu as it had been for Lorde, "that is an act of political warfare." His country did not want him alive and well doing the work he was doing but his soul talk rooted him, convincing him that this is what he must do. And while these were things that he must do, they were not easy things.

Once, a boy in one of the townships, one of the overcrowded poor black communities set up by the apartheid government, had gone to the police with information that had endangered the resistance in the township. He had put people's lives at risk, the lives of the people that Tutu was working with in order to bring freedom to the country. The people in the township had covered the boy with gasoline and were going to burn him. Tutu went to the boy and hid him in his bishop's robes, not letting the people get to him. No matter that he had endangered them. Tutu kept reminding them, "He could be your son! He could be your son!"

That is what listening deeply can do for us, if we do it often and courageously. God will build up what is good and loving in us so that we can stand for those who need it, and God will let what is evil in us die, so that it will not hurt others or ourselves. What we have to do is to chose to listen to God with our souls, paying attention, asking questions, listening with patience and for understanding, knowing that in the end, God's love will only grow within us. That is what soul talk is for.

Amen.