

“Listen to her”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 3, 2022

Galatians 6:9-10 and John 4:7-29

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right.” There’s just one problem with that lovely quote from Scripture. We *are* weary. It’s the kind of tiredness that settles beneath your skin, and stays there. The kind of tiredness that sleep doesn’t help, because this fatigue is in your soul. It’s what happens when you know how beautiful something could be, how good, but no matter what you do, you don’t seem to get any closer.

We’re tired of this pandemic, tired of feeling disconnected, tired of people being at each other’s throats, yelling and hating each other, tired of getting old and sick, tired of seeing what the church could be—this ardent community of love and justice, walking with the holy—and then seeing what the church is. We’re tired of hoping for good when bad things keep happening: schools and supermarkets getting shot up, Russian bombs in Ukraine, refugees from Central and South America turned away, gas prices, grocery bills, drugs, the January 6th hearings, racism and book banning and faith is dying and the earth is dying and... it just gets to be too much.

You want more, something better, for yourself and your children, for this world; you want life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But there are so many people talking, so many complex issues, so many immense needs, so many causes that want our attention, so many questions of faith and intellect, that our heads spin, and yeah, we get weary.

We might feel like giving up, like not coming to church, or helping that stranger, or speaking up, or voting, or praying, or getting out of bed, because what’s the point?

It’s right there, in the verse immediately before the story we read today in John: “And Jesus was tired” (4:6). Jesus was weary too. It’s why he stops at the well that day. It’s why he asks the woman for a drink of water. Jesus gets tired too. We forget that sometimes. And the woman he asks? She’s weary too. She’s there at that well, at midday, alone. Maybe she was divorced or widowed. If so, she has no economic power of her own. Or perhaps her five husbands refer to the five nations who conquered and settled Samaria. Either way, she was a woman whose body, history, and people had been colonized.

She was the kind of person others avoided. She was tired of their stares, their rejection, their judgment, and tired of just wanting someone to love her.

Now, I don’t know about you, but when I’m tired, I get cranky. I snap at people. Of course, Jesus gets cranky too; just ask that poor fig tree, ask the money lenders in the temple. But Jesus does something different here, something entirely counter-intuitive, and I want to suggest that it holds the key to sustaining us in our weariness, to navigating these complicated issues, to remaining steadfast in what is right, to binding us together as a family.

Jesus listens. He listens to a woman. A foreign woman. A woman he's not supposed to talk to. A woman who will shock and scandalize his disciples, making them wonder but none have the courage to ask, "Why are you speaking with her?" (John 4:27).

While other people are debating the proper mountain upon which to pray (even she brings it up), while other people yell about which religion is right, which ethnicity is pure, which woman is clean or unclean, which abstraction is right or wrong, Jesus sits down with a woman at a well—a woman no one else is listening too—and he listens. He hears her story. He talks with her. He hears her political concerns, her religious questions, her pain, her loneliness, her desire for living water, her potential for leadership, her right to worship God, her image of God.

He listens to her, and he gets other people listening to her. John says at the end of this story: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (4:39).

Right now, a lot of us are feeling lost and weary, in the wake of the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Should we grieve? Should we celebrate? What does our faith ask of us?

There are so many complex theological and political answers to that question, but today, I am reminded of a Jewish rabbi who sat down at a well and listened to a woman.

In a time and place where few men ever did, Jesus chose to listen to women and to trust them.

He listened, as his teenage mother sang of the powerful torn from their thrones and the lowly lifted up (Luke 1:26-56).

As a child, he listened to the prophet Anna teach about redemption (Luke 2:36-38).

When Jesus is at a wedding party, and doesn't want to intervene when the wine runs out, he listens to his mom and performs his first miracle (John 2:1-12).

He listens to the pain of two women and heals them: the daughter of a synagogue leader and a woman who's unclean because she's been hemorrhaging for more than a decade (Matt. 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:40-56).

He listens to the widow and heals her only son (Luke 7:11-16).

He listens to the women who walk with him as disciples.

He listens to the Canaanite woman who corrects his own ethnocentrism as he comes to see her faith, her story, and her plight. He learns from her (Matt. 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30).

He listens to the woman accused of sexual misconduct and about to be stoned. Jodi Craiglow writes, "Jesus knows immediately there's more to the story than this woman's adultery – and so he calls the male religious leaders on their own hypocrisy. And when all those who are unable to

‘cast the first stone’ beat their hasty retreat, he doesn’t condemn her; he restores her” (John 8:1-11).

When Lazarus dies, Jesus sits and weeps with the sisters, listening to their pain (John 11:17-45).

When Jesus sees a crippled woman, he violates religious law and cures her on the Sabbath, and when men object, he calls her a “daughter of Abraham” who has a right to be free and who belongs to God’s promise as much as they (Luke 13:10-17).

Jesus even tells the story of a widow—an outcast woman—who persists in her plea for justice with an unjust judge, and he uses this story to show that God listens.

And when he is resurrected, women are the first to witness him, and the first he sends for others to listen and hear the good news. If no one had listened to those women, we would not be here.¹

To listen is to refuse the dichotomous construct—pro-life, pro-choice; conservative, liberal; clean, unclean; loved, unloved—and to embrace the messy ambiguity, to grow in compassion and understanding, to witness another and encounter God in them, to connect and discover living water, to honor their right to exist. It is a posture of humility, which says, I don’t get to tell you how to live. I do get to listen and love you, and hope that that love helps you live.

Jesus listened to the voices of women. So should we.

Be pro-life. Be pro-choice. Or, as our denomination and I would counsel you, find a way to value both life and the rights of women, which I do believe is possible. But whatever you do, ground it in listening.

Listen to her. Let her be the arbiter of her own story.

You may not receive all the answers. But you will receive what matters most. A living person, in whom God dwells, the same God who dwells in you. And when we do that, we shall not “grow weary in doing what is right” but shall form a family of faith, which sustains us all. **Amen.**

¹ I wish to thank and recognize Jodi Craiglow for these examples of Jesus listening to women.