

WHITE STONE CEREMONY: THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

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Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: So this elderly gentleman goes to the doctor and says, "Hey, Doc, I think my wife is going deaf." And the doctor said, "So why don't you do a little test at home; stand behind her, and just move closer. Speak until she can hear, and then we'll run some tests a little bit later on, and do some treatment." And so that evening, he goes home. His wife is cooking; he's about 15 feet behind her. And he says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" And no response. So he goes 10 feet behind her. Says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" No response. Five feet behind her. "Honey, what's for dinner?" No response. Finally, he's right behind her and says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" And she turns around, and she was furious, and said, "For the fourth time, I said 'chicken'!" **[Drummer does "rim shot" drum roll] [Rev. Maraj and congregation laugh]**

So in the Book of Matthew, Chapter 13, and in the Book of Mark, Chapter 8, Jesus uses these exact words. And here's what he said. He said, "You have ears, but do not hear." Jesus was not referring to hearing problems, like in that joke. He was talking about the problem -- about the fact -- that we have ears, and we don't always listen. That we don't always pay attention. That we aren't always present; that we don't always tune in to what's going on.

You know, if you really look at it, in almost all relationships, there's one fairly major consistent complaint: "He doesn't listen." **[Congregation titters]** "She doesn't listen." "The kids -- they just don't listen." Kids say of parents, "The parents don't listen." Boss says, "The employees don't listen." The employees say, "The supervisors don't listen." The coach says, "The players don't listen." The players say, "The coaches don't listen."

Not listening causes a lot more misunderstandings and frustration and hurt than we realize. Not listening -- sometimes people feel like they're not heard. Which means that sometimes they're not known, they're not cared for. That they are not loved.

Not listening impacts us a lot more than we realize in all of our relationships. You know, we often don't even listen to ourselves! You ever had a situation come up and it was, you know; you thought about making this decision, and your inner voice said "No." And you went ahead and give a "Yes." And the next day you said, "God! Why didn't I listen to myself!" **[Congregation laughs]** And whether it's, "Take the umbrella," and you don't, and it rains -- "God, why didn't I listen?" Whether it was that second piece of chocolate cake that your body said, "No; we don't need it." And you had it; "Why didn't I listen?" Not listening to others, not listening to ourselves and, especially, not listening to God.

You know the entire theme of the entire Old Testament is one thing: when the children of Israel listened to God, things went well, and when they didn't listen to God, things did not go as well. And you look at the main characters who listened: Abraham, Moses, Noah, David. That's why it says so many times in the Old Testament, "Listen to the still, small voice of God" over and over again. How often do we not even take the time to listen?

You know, we miss out on a lot, and create a lot of hurt and pain and suffering for ourselves by not listening. Not listening, especially, we feel disconnected from others. We feel disconnected from ourselves; we feel disconnected from God. And we even feel disconnected from love.

The 1930s and 40s theologian Paul Tillich once said, "The first law of love is to listen." And if that's true -- the first law of love is to listen ... If the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love others as you love yourself, maybe what Tillich is saying is: it's equally valuable to say, "The greatest commandment is to listen to God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to listen to others as we listen to ourselves."

Listening absolutely would change and enhance every relationship we have. I think it would help us be more true to ourselves. And more connected to that divine wisdom and our divine purpose, as well, and how to move through it and achieve it.

You know, we always think, "How am I going to change my life? Well, I'm going to set some goals. Gonna do positive thinking and affirmations. I'm going to ask and seek and knock, and take action. Determination." And those are all fine and good. But we rarely ever think, "How am I going to improve my life? Oh, I think I'm going to listen!" **[Congregation laughs]** See how exciting that is? **[Congregation laughs]** And yet, I would say, how valuable and powerful and important a tool it is, and an underutilized tool, in most of our lives.

How many people would say that you could be a better listener, at least in some area of your life? And how many would say that your life would be enhanced by becoming a better listener? We all agree with that.

The White Stone Ceremony is kind of based on the powerful spiritual practice of listening: listening with the assumption and the awareness that God has a great plan and purpose for our lives. With the awareness that there is divine wisdom inside each and every one of us, and that life is calling us to express more ... if we are willing to listen. We're being called to love bigger, and to make a bigger difference. To live with greater compassion and kindness. But we need to turn in -- to tap in -- to that power by listening.

David Williamson developed this Ceremony, and he did it based on the Book of Revelation: the interpretation of Revelation 2:17. I'll read it to you, and it will appear up on the screen, as well.

"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. And I will give a white stone, and on that white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

So let's kind of analyze this a little bit. Notice it starts out by saying, "Let anyone who has an ear." Let anyone ... And the next sentence begins, "To everyone." Anyone and everyone is saying that God's Spirit and wisdom is available to anyone and everyone: to all of us! To you; to me. No one is excluded from the wisdom and the connection of listening to God's Spirit.

And then it says the two things that we need to do, even though everybody has access to it. The first one is: To anyone who listens. To anyone who will pause in their life to be still, and to open their hearts to hear the still, small voice of God. To anyone who has the faith and trust that there is inner wisdom and intelligence to guide us, and is willing to hear it: to pause and listen.

So the first thing you've got to do is listen. The second one is to everyone who conquers. (And it also says "overcome" in certain Scriptures.) And what it means is: to anyone who is willing to overcome the challenges of life, and not let it have you get stuck. To move forward, in spite of the obstacles and problems. The person who is willing to move forward in faith. The person who is willing to grow and to learn and to seek. You know, to expand themselves, and stretch themselves; to go after their desires, to find their purpose. To live a deeper spiritual life. For the person who's really willing to live, and live more fully.

If you're willing to listen, and you're willing to overcome the obstacles and keep moving forward to greater heights, then three things will be given to you.

The first one it says: you will be given some of the hidden manna. Manna, we know, is the bread that God gave the children of Israel in the desert. And the thing about the manna was that it spoiled at the end of the day. It was their daily bread. It was not just their physical nourishment; it also represents their spiritual nourishment. And it only lasted ... and some people tried to hoard it, and it all went bad. Because part of the deal is to trust that you will get your daily wisdom.

You ever had a situation where you want to pray on and make sure you have every duck in a row -- know every detail -- before you start? Anybody ever like that? Apparently just me and the person in the

front row! **[Congregation laughs]** But what it is saying: daily bread. See, people were hoarding and thinking, "No, I won't have enough." But it was God saying, "Just what you need today: you will have it." You don't need to know every single step along the way; just follow the guidance, the nourishment of the daily bread you get today. You will have what you need today to live this day well. Trust it. Live it. And use it.

And then the second one is ... The first one is the hidden manna. You get that spiritual immersion of daily bread. The other one is a white stone. Now, it was customary back in those ancient days that, when a prisoner was freed, they got a white stone to show they were free from prison. That they were now free. And the white stone represents that we are not in prison. That sometimes when we feel trapped; sometimes when we feel stuck; sometimes when we feel held back and limited in our life, the truth is: we're free! That we are absolutely free! That white stone that you've got -- you can hold it in your hand right now -- is to remind you that you're free!

No matter how many mistakes you've made ... No matter how many years things haven't gone right ... No matter how many relationships haven't worked ... Guess what? You are free to choose. You are free to change. And you are free to create.

I am free. Together **[with congregation]** "I am free."

Take a deep breath. Feel how good it feels to be free.

I am free to choose. Together: **[with congregation]** "I am free to choose."

I am free to change. Together: **[with congregation]** "I am free to change."

I am free to create. **[Congregation]:** "I am free to create."

I am free! **[Congregation]:** "I am free."

Take a deep breath.

So when you're willing to listen, when you're willing to overcome, you will get your daily nourishment -- your daily bread -- and you will be reminded that you are free! You are absolutely free: free to choose; free to change; free to create.

And the last thing it says: and a new name will be written on that stone. And so, in the Bible, a name really represents someone's nature or their purpose in life. Moses' name meant "to draw out." He was drawn out of the Nile, and he also was there to draw out the people of Israel, out of slavery in Egypt. To draw out. So the name is connected with their nature or their actual purpose in life.

Every time a name changed in the Bible -- like from Abram to Abraham, or Sarai to Sarah, or Saul to Paul, or Jacob to Israel - it meant some shift in the direction of leadership, and the difference someone was supposed to make. It was always a change in name: a higher status of what you were meant to do, and a new direction and purpose for your life, for that period.

So when we talk about listening for a name to put on this white stone, it's saying: what nature or quality is God calling you to embody and express more in this year? What is your soul seeking to express more of that you haven't fully allowed and developed?

And it can be a word, a name, or whatever it is. It could be love, could be what comes to you as what you are meant to embody more and express of. It could be joy. You know, it could be kindness. It could be compassion. It could be to stand firm. It could be to step up. It could be to speak up. It could be to let go. You know, it could be focus. It could be clarity. It could be healing.

I don't know what it is for you, but I guarantee there's something in your soul stirring. There's something in your soul that is calling you to listen, and to follow it.

Imagine if your word for this year was just to be kinder. Could you imagine if you embodied and expressed kindness intentionally and consciously in all your interactions -- no matter how beautiful, no

matter how frustrating, no matter a stranger, no matter a family member ... whoever it would be ... co-worker -- if you intentionally embodied that particular quality?

Or maybe it's patience. Maybe it's gratitude. I don't know what it is, but I know something's in your soul. Something's in all of our souls that are calling us to be expressed. The question is: are we willing to listen to it?

And then the last one it says: no one knows it except the one who receives it. And that's saying no one can listen to God for you. No one can go to that secret place. No one can know what's in your soul for you. That is inner work that is our work to do.

So Scripture is saying: to anyone who listens, who's willing to pause and listen to Spirit ... to anyone who's willing to overcome and live your life ... that they will receive their daily bread -- their spiritual nourishment. They will ... what was that second thing? **[Congregation laughs]** Receive the white stone that's in your hand that says, *"I am free! I am free to choose; I am free to change; I am free to create."*

And then the final thing: you get that new name. That quality and that spiritual direction. That thing in your soul that is yearning to come alive and be more fully expressed in you and shared with the world.

Blaise Pascal said an interesting thing. He said, *"All of man's misfortunes stem from one thing: man's inability to sit quietly alone,"* and have inner stillness. So if he's saying that all of our misfortunes come from not being still -- not listening; not being quiet -- I would say all of our fortunes come from being still. Being willing to be quiet and listen to what the Spirit is saying to us, and trying to guide us.

So as we begin this New Year, are you ready to take your next spiritual step? Are you ready to know what that quality and that direction -- that new name -- that you're meant to embody and express and share with the world is? It's the same question as: are you willing to listen?

So everybody, what we're going to do ... We're going to do a little meditation. And you have that white stone. And we're going to listen. And if a word comes to you that is yours -- or a phrase, or whatever it is -- comes to you, just write it down on that. If it doesn't come as a result of this time, that's okay. But I guarantee you, creating a space with an intention to listen to your spirit and soul, will open a space.

When I've done this, it's never come in this time. It usually comes when I'm driving somewhere, or doing something else. But if it doesn't come as a result of this time, it will come because of this time and this willingness and intention to listen.

And so, everybody, just take a deep breath right now. Take your white stone in your hand. Remember that connection. You are free! And let's set that intention to listen. And so I invite you to close your eyes now. **[Light piano music plays]** And just take a deep breath. And just open your heart to God. Knowing that God has a plan and a purpose for your life, let's just prepare ourselves to listen by listening to the words of this beautiful song that will help lead us to listen to what the Spirit is saying to us.

[Soloist sings]: *"Something's calling me. Something's calling me. Something's calling me a little deeper than I've ever been before. Something's calling me. Something's calling me. Something's calling me a little bit deeper than I've ever been before."*

[Rev. Richard Maraj]: So I invite you just to take a deep breath, and just open your heart with your willingness and intention to listen to what Spirit is saying to you. Grounded in the awareness that God has a plan and a purpose for your life, we just ask, *"God, reveal thyself to me. Reveal your will and purpose for my life. What is it that your soul is calling you to live? To express, embody and fulfill this year? Reveal that quality; reveal that spiritual direction and purpose that is my direction for my life for 2022. Show me and share it with me in a way that will be clear and easy for me to understand."*

So everyone just take a deep breath, and set your intention to listen to what your spirit is saying and what your soul is calling you to. It might come in the form of a picture or an image, an idea, a word, a feeling. Just trust that God will show it to you in a way you will understand. No need to force it; just open yourself to it. Allow it to come through you. Allow it to be revealed to you.

And if it comes to you in this moment, just take your pencil and write it down. And if it doesn't, keep holding a space ... because I guarantee you, it will come as a result of this time. Even if it's not now; even if it's at a later time. Your willingness to open yourself and listen to Spirit will set the stage and open a place for it to come forth.

You are being called to do great things ... even greater than you can imagine that is in you. You're here to touch and uplift and inspire lives. To be an instrument of God's light. So let that gift, let that quality, let that direction just come through you. Let that name and nature be revealed of how you are being called to step up and step in to who you are meant to be.

So we just give thanks to God for this time to practice listening to that still, small voice ... listening to Spirit. We give thanks that that name and directions come now, and we give thanks in advance if it will be revealed to us at a later right and perfect time. We give thanks for the incredible spiritual practice of listening. We know that, when we open ourselves to listen to Spirit more, it opens us more, and to express more of God's light, love and goodness in and through our lives and in and through our world. For all of these great things, and all the greater things to come, we truly give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

And it's great to start the year with resolutions and goals and intentions and visions. And I think that's wonderful! But I think we all need to also include the practice of listening as a way to enhance and to improve and to deepen and enjoy the quality of our lives, and to experience greater levels of happiness and success.

Practice listening to others this week. Practice listening to yourself. Practice listening to God. Because good and great things are there for us -- amazing things, great and small are available. The question is: are you willing to listen?

God bless you all! ***[Congregation applauds]***

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