**Isaiah 40:21-31**

**1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

**Mark 1:29-39**

There’s a sermon topic making its way through town right now, and not just in Christian churches, but in the Muslim congregation and the Jewish synagogue; among the Unitarians and Buddhists. The topic is suicide. Local people of faith are being asked by their faith leaders to consider one question on this topic. More about that later.

This issue of suicide – somewhat surprisingly to me – touches almost all of us. You may know someone who has taken his or her own life. Very likely you know *of* someone who has done so. And as alarming as this problem is – there are three-to-four times as many suicides in Western Colorado as the rest of the state[[1]](#footnote-1) – it is even worse when you consider young people. Four of them took their own lives in 2016. There were teen suicides last year as well but statistics for 2017 aren’t in yet. And really, it isn’t just teenagers. The four who suicided in 2016 were aged 19 down to ten. Ten years old! That’s fifth grade. We have several fifth graders here at Nativity. How is it possible that a child who isn’t even yet an adolescent could take his or her own life?

How is it possible? There are many moving parts to this problem. Drugs and alcohol. Easy availability of handguns. Mental illness, often untreated or under-treated. There is generational poverty, often linked up with crime, and the lack of a stable family life that all add up to hopelessness. To be without hope is to be spiritually null and void: empty. The root of the suicide problem is, in my view, spiritual.

This is a spiritual issue. God does not want hurting humans to suffer alone. God does not want any human to be alone but for occasional solitude. Even God has company – in the Christian view of Trinity – so that God is three: Creator; Mediator; Life-giver. If God dwells in eternal relationship, doesn’t that give us a clue? What works for God must work for us.

So what about that question floating around houses of worship this weekend and next? It’s a simple, two-word question. It is: “Who’s listening?” Who’s listening to the anguish of people suffering so much that all they want to do is stop the pain, even if that means stopping life itself? Who’s listening to young people who haven’t yet developed all the coping strategies of adulthood? Who’s listening is another way of saying, “Who cares?”

To bring this to a personal level, I’d like to do something a little different. I’d like to ask you three questions. I’ll give you a few moments to ponder each one. If you’re comfortable closing your eyes as you ponder, feel free, but that’s optional. The first question is:

Who were the adults in your life – apart from family members – that you could turn to for any reason when you were young? Who were the non-family adults who listened to you?

The second question is: Who are the non-family adults in the life of your child or a relative’s child that he or she can turn to for any reason? Who outside your family listens to your kid?

The third question is: What child, who isn’t a relative, would name you as that listening adult? What child do you listen to?

One of the things we faith leaders have found shocking over the year-and-a-half that we’ve been working on this issue is the degree to which today’s young people are emotionally isolated. One survey had them saying, “Please, teach our parents how to talk to us.” And that might be nuanced to say: Teach them how to listen.

Listening and hearing are not the same things. In the toss and tumble of family life we often barely hear one another. But listening is more than just receiving sound waves. It is a skill that can be learned and practiced. It requires us to stop talking long enough to actually process what we’ve heard.

The ones who are really good at this are doing “active listening.” This means listening to the whole person – the speaker’s body language and emotions. It means listening with genuine curiosity, so that you find yourself saying, “Go on, tell me more,” rather than waiting for a break in the conversation so that you can talk. If you’re talking you are NOT listening. And if what you’re doing is planning what to say next, again, you’re NOT listening.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is what happens when we listen. American psychologist Karl Menninger said, “Listening is a strange and magnetic thing, a creative force. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.”[[3]](#footnote-3) That’s amazing! *When we are listened to, it creates us!* I often find the solution to a vexing problem when someone really listens to me. Often, the solution comes out of my own mouth, but only if the one I’m speaking to is patient, not in a rush, not judging me or trying to fix me.

I once dated a dashing fellow, but only briefly. Because every time I spilled out my thoughts and concerns to him, I could count on one of three responses: “Let me tell you what you did wrong;” “Let me tell you how you can do it better next time;” or my absolute favorite: “I told you so.” That’s judging. That’s fixing. It is not listening.

Another deal breaker in genuine conversation is self-reference. I tell you something significant and then you tell me how the same thing happened to you. You may think you’re helping me feel better but you’re not. You have just silenced me. If you really want to help me, invite me to tell my story. “Go on, tell me more…….”

Listening is a gift of spiritual significance. It is a gift we can learn to give to others. When we listen, we give the other a sense of importance, hope and love that he or she may not receive any other way. Christian author H. Norman Wright says, “Through listening, we nurture and validate the feelings another has, especially when that one is having difficulties in life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Listening is a gift of spiritual significance.

Listening heals. Listening deeply and non-defensively solves problems. Listening is the key to relating; to relating well. “Being heard is so close to being loved that for most of us, they are almost indistinguishable.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Will listening stop the problem of teen suicide? I don’t know but it is a good place to start especially for those of us who are spiritually-minded. Spiritual problems need spiritual solutions and hearing, listening, relating are spiritual activities.

Which brings me to the calendar. We are approaching Lent. It is not next week, but the week after. But we can start thinking about how we want to be intentional this Lent. Why not make listening – in a surrendered, present way – part of your Lenten observance? It does take real attention to do.

You might also consider coming to the public meeting about teen suicide on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. That will be Tuesday, February 13th. Almost two dozen faith communities will be present at Canyon View Vineyard Church along with important figures in this issue. Mental health experts. Law enforcement. City and county officials and representatives of District 51.

And if you should happen upon a young person in the grocery story, at the library, in your neighborhood or anywhere else: that will be your golden opportunity to practice active listening. You might just be amazed at what happens!

1. Lindsey Pallares, “Suicide rates up in Mesa County” KJCT-News 8, http://www.kjct8.com/home/headlines/273691611.html, 2014.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Steve Keating, “Hearing Isn’t Listening,” https://stevekeating.me/2013/11/15/hearing-isnt-listening/,

   November 15, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/karl\_a\_menninger\_143978 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Quotes About Listening,” www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/listening [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Augsburger, Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)