"The Power of Listening"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
December 10, 2017

Earlier this year, the hash tag "me-too" exploded on social media as women...and men...shared their own experience of sexual harassment. Then, this week, TIME magazine released their 2017 Person of the Year cover and story naming "The Silence Breakers." The article recounts,

> This reckoning appears to have sprung up overnight. But it has actually been simmering for years, decades, centuries. Women have had it with bosses and co-workers who not only cross boundaries but don't even seem to know that boundaries exist.

Why has a centuries old problem simmered for *so* long? Why have so many women stayed silent? Why have so many perpetrators been able to act without consequence or changed behavior?

As a scholar of women and gender studies and as a woman, I have not been surprised by the flow of stories by women. Sexual harassment, assault, and violence have permeated a culture saturated in patriarchal assumptions. I have been surprised that this time people seem to be listening.

My idea for this sermon actually predated the TIME article. As I considered how to explore our monthly theme of listening, the recent events of women's—and some men's—stories of sexual harassment seemed to present a striking example of the power of listening. (Turns out, TIME magazine agreed!) It has not been the experience of harassment or assault that has changed over these past months, but rather the cultural willingness to listen to these stories and believe these women. Truly listening made the difference.

Of course, to listen, someone has to be speaking. And the courage of the 'silence breakers' is to be commended. Speaking out is not easy. For many, silence has been preferable to the possibility of retaliation. TIME quotes 42 year-old Isabel Pascual, a strawberry picker in California, who says,

> I was afraid. When the man was harassing me, he threatened to harm my children and me—that's why I kept quiet. I felt desperate. I cried and cried. But, thank God, my friends in the fields support me. So I said, Enough. I lost the fear. It doesn't

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matter if they criticize me. I can support other people who are going through the same thing.

Fear silenced Pasqual and so many other women. Too often the offenders have held power over those they have harassed or assaulted.

Yet, in Pasqual's story, the shift in the dynamics of power came when she no longer felt alone. Her friends supported her. She lost her fear. This simple affirmation that one is not alone in the experience of sexual harassment or assault can make all the difference. The Me Too hash tag was born from this keen awareness of not feeling alone. Although not on the cover of the TIME issue, the creator of this hash tag, Tarana Burke is a part of the story—in the magazine and, more importantly, in the emergence of a movement. In 2006, she created the Me Too movement in order to develop a sense of solidarity among the survivors of sexual violence with whom she worked. When actor Alyssa Milano used the hash tag, it went viral.

I know that some of you posted your own story on Facebook—or, at least, the simple phrase to indicate that you too had been impacted. This is not an 'outside' story; this is a 'right here' story. And so, it's important that we talk about it right here. That we are not silent on what's been happening in our culture. That I am not silent from this pulpit about this momentous reckoning.

It is a reckoning. It is an accounting of the events of the past—and an effort to hold people *to* account. None of which can happen if people don't speak out . . . or if people don't listen.

Listening is more than hearing the words uttered by a person. Listening is an effort to *understand* a person—their experience, their emotions, their perspective. This does not mean that you have to agree with a person. But to truly *listen*, you need to be open to the possibility of believing them and to being changed by them.

Frankly, many women have not believed that anyone with the power to hold their harasser accountable would listen to them. The story of Anita Hill has been held up as an example of what happens when a woman speaks out about harassment against a powerful man. After a very public, very personal, and very painful interview about her experience, Clarence Thomas went on to be confirmed as a Supreme Court Justice.

Watching that . . . who would want to speak out. And, well, was that the point? A very public, if not entirely conscious, message that women shouldn't bother to speak up. A warning that no one would listen.

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Listening is more than words being heard. Listening is more than simply waiting until another stops speaking so that you can start. Listening is more than crafting your own response point by point as another is speaking. Listening is creating space in yourself to attune to another—their words, their communication, their experience.

A clear example of the failure to attune and listen emerged this week in the Improv class I'm taking. Four of us were in a scene with instructions to play a character with a strong point of view. When the instructor rang a bell, we were supposed to change characters—to take over the storyline and characteristics of a character created by one of our scene partners. However, we failed miserably. Everybody was so busy loudly improvising their own point of view and character in the scene that we didn't listen to what the others were doing. When the bell rang and we had to switch characters—we struggled to recreate the other characters because we had not paid enough attention. With the patience required of most teachers, our instructor calmly explained that we had to share the focus and listen to each other. Talking all at once spelled disaster.

While we do not usually need to recreate another person's character and storyline at a bell's notice, this exercise does point to the need to listen to someone to understand their point of view. If we are only listening to ourselves or our own conversations, we simply cannot hear what is happening in another's experience or story. Not unless we stop and listen.

To listen, we have to pay attention. And yet, our attention is a limited resource. What—or who—we pay attention to makes a difference. Where do you place your attention? To whom do you listen to most? Do we listen to our children? Our spouses? Our Friends? Do we listen to our staff? To our co-workers? To those who work to help us—cashiers, housekeepers, or farm workers?

Do we stop talking long enough to listen? Some have pointed out that the letters in listen also spell silent. And others have noted that we have two ears and one mouth—perhaps a suggestion of the proportion in which they should be used. To listen, we have to be willing to shift our attention to what another is saying and away from our own speech.

When we listen to one another, seeking to understand what the other is saying, the impact can be powerful. Henry David Thoreau said, "It takes two to speak the truth - one to speak and another to hear." The Silence Breakers spoke the truth of their experience and people have been listening. From social media to board rooms, people are listening to women speak out about their experiences of harassment and assault.

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The particulars of different situations vary—some far more egregious and damaging than others. And, the consequences have varied. Some men have lost their jobs and the confidence of their employers or fans. Some have chosen to resign. Some have been forced to resign. The sweeping reckoning seeks to send a powerful message that this demeaning behavior is NOT okay and will not be tolerated.

Yet, others remain defiant in their office or may yet elected to public office—as we'll see on Tuesday when voters in Alabama go to the polls. Some who have been accused deny the stories and we are watching must decide to whom we will listen. While some have raised concerns about false accusations and a puritanical witchhunt, it's important to also notice how denial has been an effective strategy for centuries. Denial worked because of who had the power to speak and be heard . . . and who did not.

In the TIME article, I was struck by the interview by musician Taylor Swift. (And, wow, I did not ever expect to quote Taylor Swift in a sermon!) After a radio DJ reached under her skirt to grab her rear end, Swift spoke out. The DJ was fired and sued Swift for damages. She countersued for a symbolic $1 in order to testify in open court. Swift told TIME, "I figured that if he would be brazen enough to assault me under these risky circumstances . . . imagine what he might do to a vulnerable, young artist if given the chance."

Her comment illustrates how sexual harassment and assault is so often about power. Why did this man think he could simply grab a woman? Such behavior is rooted in the centuries old assumptions of a patriarchal mindset that women are objects for men's pleasure. To call such behavior sexist belies the depth of the problem. Such actions emerge from the belief that women do not share equal worth and dignity with men. Such actions are rooted in assumptions that men women do not need to have the boundaries of their bodies respected—that women are not the arbiters of who can and cannot touch them, of who can and cannot presume sexual familiarity or access.

When we teach our children and youth about sexuality in our Our Whole Lives curriculum, we teach them consent. We teach them that their body belongs to them along. And they have the right to be heard when they say no to a touch—even a hug or a kiss from a relative and certainly a stranger. We teach them to listen to what others say and to expect others to listen to them when they say no.

Such lessons are rooted in our Unitarian Universalist principle that we affirm and promote the dignity of every person. And this value is why listening is so important. When we listen to someone, we affirm their worth by attending to their point of view. Again, listening does

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not mean we must agree with them. But, to 'hear them out' is to acknowledge their experience.

As the TIME article closes, the authors quote journalist Megan Kelly:

> "What if we did complain? . . . What if we didn't whine, but we spoke our truth in our strongest voices and insisted that those around us did better? What if that worked to change reality right now?"

The Silence Breakers and all those who posted #Me Too or otherwise shared their story did so with the hope that someone would be listening. For too long, women's experiences of sexual harassment and assault has not been listened to by those in power. What would it look like to change reality right now? I think it would include a strong affirmation that neither women nor men deserve to have the boundaries of their bodies violated by another. That when women speak up about their experience of being demeaned or disrespected *because they are a woman* that we listen and take it as a serious violation of their dignity.

I may seem angry. And I am. This is personal to me as it is to many women. I too have lived aware to the possibilities of assault and sensitive to the ways my dignity as a person has been undermined because of my gender. But my anger is broader than my personal experience. I am angry that as a culture we have allowed for so long that so many have been silenced. I am angry at a patriarchal mindset that both men and women have absorbed that teaches us to tolerate such behavior as 'normal' and unchangeable.

And, I am so grateful that "for the moment, the world is listening"—as the TIME article ends. Listening can change our understanding which can change our behavior. Listening is far more than simply hearing words . . . it is the recognition of whole worlds beyond ourselves and our understanding. Such listening can change the world.

So may it be.
Amen.

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