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Sometimes we think of prayer as asking for things, using our words to get what we want, but I sometimes have found that a deeper form of prayer comes through listening. By sitting quietly and focusing on the sounds around us, we might hear things we've not heard before: songs of birds, chirping of crickets, the breeze blowing through trees, creaks from the settling of a building or house, children playing nearby, or even God whispering in our hearts. It's in those moments of listening that we open ourselves to God's gentle nudges, to the Spirit's movement within our lives.

A week ago while sitting on a boat off the coast of Mexico, I heard sounds that I normally don't hear, sounds that reminded me of the wondrous creativity of God. We were on a whale watching boat, and after quietly sitting and waiting, we heard someone excitedly shout they had spotted a whale. Staci captured numerous photos, including the one on our bulletin cover. After the whale submerged under the water, a crew member dropped a

microphone over the side of the boat, and this is what we heard (*play whale songs*).

A marine biologist on the boat explained that all male whales in the Pacific Ocean area sing the same song. From Mexico to Hawaii to Alaska, the same tune echoes throughout the water. But then she told us something that amazed me—at some point during the year a whale will slightly change a part of the song, and somehow all the whales add that portion to their songs. It's as though the whales are mystically connected to one another, with a slight change in song affecting all the other whale tunes.

As I sat on the boat marveling about whale songs and the interconnectedness of whales, I thought of this week's scripture about the Roman centurion sending messengers to ask Jesus to heal a servant who was very ill.

Being a centurion meant he was a central leader in the Roman power structure, a military leader who had numerous men under his control. When someone who served him became ill, the centurion

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requested that several Jewish elders ask Jesus to come and heal his servant. When the elders found Jesus, it appears they needed to convince Jesus to heal someone outside their traditional religious boundaries, for they pleaded, “He deserves to have you do this for him.” And then they sweetened their plea by saying, “He loves our people and he built our synagogue for us.”

Jesus followed the elders that the centurion had sent to meet him. When he arrived at the man’s house, the military leader greeted Jesus by saying, “Master, you don’t have to go to all this trouble. I’m not that good a person, you know. I’d be embarrassed for you to come to my house, even embarrassed to come to you in person. Just give the order and my servant will get well. I’m a man under orders; I also give orders. I tell one soldier, ‘Go,’ and he goes; another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” (Luke 7:6-8, *The Message*).

Jesus was so impressed with the centurion’s trust in him that he exclaimed, “I tell you, even in Israel I haven’t found faith like this” (7:9, *CEB*). Although some watching and listening to Jesus might have felt offended that Jesus used this outsider centurion as an example of faith, it appears Jesus sensed the interconnectedness of this man’s faith with his own mission to bring God’s hope to the world.

In Luke’s Gospel, this is Jesus’ first encounter with a Gentile, a person outside the Jewish religion, an outsider, one who was considered unclean and unholy. Could it be that this centurion’s encounter with Jesus was enough to change the direction of Jesus’ ministry, a mission that began with the Jewish community and broadened to include even us Gentiles?

Luke continues to tell us later in his story that Jesus welcomed other outsiders by eating with tax collectors and helping the poor. Like whale songs that change when interconnected whales encounter

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new tunes, maybe Jesus' ministry changed as he recognized the interconnectedness of his own Jewish faith with the outsiders of his faith. Even without even entering the centurion's home, he offered healing to his servant.

We know very little about the person healed or about why he needed healing. We know only that he was a servant, another outsider, someone not even named in the story. Jesus never even met the person, and yet, through the centurion, another outsider, he received healing.

Have you ever felt like an outsider in need of healing? Maybe the healing you needed wasn't a physical healing, but a desire to be included, welcomed, valued, even in the midst of your limitations and weakness? I imagine Cory Weissman may have felt that way in February 2012 when he led out the men's basketball team of Gettysburg College for their last game of the season. Four years earlier he had suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed on one side. Four years of rehab

and he was able to walk with a limp, but was still not able to play competitively. But before his stroke he had been on the varsity team and the Gettysburgh coach wanted to give him a few seconds on court as a senior. So Cory was nominated captain and led out the starting five for what was both his first and last game for Gettysburg, for he was now due to graduate.

Knowing the struggle it was just to be there, the crowd and the players from both teams greeted him with wild applause. The Gettysburg coach gave him a few minutes on court before benching him.

[Later toward the end of the game] with one minute to go Gettysburg was well ahead and the coach sent Cory back out on court. The Washington coach [from the other team] called time out and instructed his players to foul Cory Weissman. For those who don't know basketball this was a very generous act, for it meant Cory would be given two shots at the basket.

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Cory takes his place at the free throw line, feels the weight of the ball in his hands, lifts and shoots. It misses badly. But he has a second and final shot left. Again he feels the weight of the ball in his hands, lifts and shoots. This time the ball flies straight through the hoop, and the crowd breaks out in thunderous applause.

The assistant vice president for athletics at Gettysburg...later wrote to Washington College: “Your coach...along with his...staff and student-athletes, displayed a measure of compassion that I have never witnessed in over 30 years of involvement in intercollegiate athletics.”¹

Even though Cory was not completely healed from that stroke in a way that restored his body and ability to play basketball, he experienced an even better healing that night when both teams included him in the game. It’s as though everyone there

knew what needed to happen, as though one whale began to change its tune and soon all the others began singing the same song.

That’s what it’s like to be part of the body of Christ, to be part of the church. We are all interconnected. When one of us is suffering, I’ve seen how this congregation offers healing words of comfort and encouragement. I’ve also seen how this group responds to those in need outside the walls of this church. It’s as though you hear the whale songs in our community and you change your tune in order to respond. As you hear the sounds of those struggling around us, you change your tune and respond to those in need. Just as Jesus offered healing to those around him, may we continue to offer words of healing for those seeking hope, those seeking welcome, those seeking meaning for their lives.

<https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/welcoming-the-vulnerable/>

¹ Reported by Frank Record, “When there’s more to winning than winning.” NPR Radio, Feb 22, 2012, as listed at