



Listening to Jesus and one another
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost A 9/6/20
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

Some years ago, when I was a relatively new father, I found myself in quite a state. I had two very active kids, a wife with a demanding job, and my own ministry with high expectations. I was beginning to feel anxious and angry much of the time. I had also struggled on and off with depression since college, and so I knew it was time to get some help, help that my friends and family couldn't provide.

I made an appointment with a therapist who a friend recommended. Not long thereafter, I found myself sitting across from an attentive, bearded man with a pad and pen. He kindly posed a simple question: "So, what brings you here?" And I began.

He was quietly attentive, unobtrusively taking the occasional note, periodically offering a gently clarifying question. When I finished, I had a sense of lightness, hope, healing, and energy that I had not felt in quite some time. He had hardly said a word. I realized that I had been profoundly heard, deeply listened to. No solutions, no psychobabble. Just a generous, spacious ear and heart.

The healing power of listening.

I'm reminded of a lecture I heard in seminary, from a distinguished psychiatrist, on the art of listening. She recounted a story illustrating the power of feeling heard. She recalled a harried night as a medical resident in psychiatry, finally arriving in the overnight call room after a long shift at the hospital where she was training, hoping to grab a few minutes of rest. Much to her chagrin, the phone rang. And on the other end of the line was a person who was suicidal, seeking life-saving counsel. She was so exhausted that despite her best efforts, she could not stay awake.

Sometime later, she woke with a start, groggy and terrified that she had lost this caller; a brief silence passed before she could formulate her words. Into the silence came the voice of the distressed caller saying, miraculously, "I feel so much better. Thank you for listening."

The power of even *feeling* heard is considerable. (I don't think that's best practice, by the way.)

You may have noticed the repetition of the word "listen" in the Gospel passage this morning—it appears four times, in fact. Jesus is describing a process of reconciliation between two people who are members of the church. In the laudable service of gender inclusive language, the translators substitute "member of the church" for the Greek word that actually means "brother." However, what we want to hold onto here is the more intense sense of connection that brother, or sister, or *family*— rather than "member"— connotes...for we know that listening in families can be extraordinarily difficult.

One person has sinned against another. Not unusual in the Church, is it? Or anywhere humans congregate. As the Church in Matthew's time grew, leadership began to put structures into place to



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support that growth. Matthew alone among the Gospels uses the word *ekklesia*, which is translated 'church. He's very interested in these organizational details of this growing movement of "The Way."

Unfortunately, though understandably, modern people may read this passage as a sort of HR manual, or a judicial proceeding. We may hear it as much as a way of safeguarding the "rights of the accused," as it is assurance that the accuser will have her issue resolved. But if we get tangled up in a legalistic understanding of proper procedures, as important as clear guidelines and boundaries are for the safety of any community, we miss the critical thrust of this passage.

The key is listening.

Listening builds connections. Listening softens conflict. Listening maximizes the possibility for healing. Listening minimizes the chances that real hurt will be ignored. Listening doesn't guarantee success, but without listening, success is impossible. (Parenthetically, as every parent of teenagers knows, and as every teenager eventually learns, one must not confuse being listened to, with getting what we want.)

Real listening is incredibly difficult. It is more than being quiet, although even that in itself can be challenging, especially in highly charged situations. I speak as a recovering interrupter. We are all familiar with the sensation in our minds and bodies of formulating our response to what we are hearing, so much that we aren't really pay attention what is being said.

The other day I was one of several hundred viewers from around the country of a debate sponsored by Braver Angels, a nationwide organization dedicated to the depolarization of our civic culture. The topic was, resolved, "Donald Trump has been good for Black America." To keep the event from devolving into verbal, on-line brawl, the conversation was guided by a highly skilled moderator ("the Chair") and structured according to strict, and timed, parliamentary procedures. There were panelists from a variety of walks of life, mostly black, but a few white, who had prepared statements in the affirmative and the negative. Each panelist made a statement, followed by response from an opposing panelist. Then, two questions from viewers who had typed their questions into the chat box, were directed through the Chair, to the panelist who had just spoken.

Pretty quickly, I realized I was so keen on formulating my questions that I was completely missing what the speakers were saying. And it was more than just the fact that I am a clumsy typist. I was so concerned with how I wanted to respond, that I was completely missing what the speakers were trying to communicate. In essence, although I was quiet, I was not present. I also realized, gratefully, at the end of the two hours, that listening for even the smallest points of commonality, resulted in feeling more connected, more hopeful, more whole.

No, real listening is much more than simply being quiet. Listening is primarily about being fully present. I'm going to paraphrase Krista Tippett here. She's the host of the podcast *On Being* and a founder of the Civil Conversations Project. She says real listening is powered by curiosity. It involves vulnerability, a

willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. It is never in “gotcha” mode. The generous listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the speaker. The would-be listener patiently summons her own best self and her own most generous words and questions. Tippet calls this “generous listening.”

https://onbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/8.5x11_BetterConversationsGuide_July2020_FINAL.pdf

Jesus was a generous listener. Time and time again, Jesus is interrupted, waylaid. But he always makes time for those who are ignored by the rest of the world, to listen to their deepest needs.

Think of Blind Bartimaeus, sitting in the dust, shouting “mercy,” silenced by those who find him expendable. But in the midst of the crowd, Jesus says, “Call him here.” And then, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus responds, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus says, “Go. Your faith has made you well.” (Mark 10.46-52) He listened.

When Jesus is asked hard questions, he listens for the need behind the question. Think of the story of the rich young man: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he says. Jesus responds, “You know the commandments.” The young man, replies, “I have done those.” Jesus looks at him with compassion, and says, “One thing you lack: sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow me.” The man got an answer he didn’t like; but it sounds as though it was the answer to his deepest need, a need so deep he couldn’t quite recognize it. But Jesus heard the need that leads to life. (Mt. 19:16-30, Mk 10:17-31; Gospel of Lk 18:18-30)

I imagine Jesus fully present, not just with the ears on his head, but with the ears of his heart. He’s not itching to unload a canned line or a stock response. I imagine even a sense of humor, not mocking, but the mark of recognition that comes with embracing our common humanity. In today’s passage, I believe Jesus is promising to be with us when we ask for the power to listen. So that we can be present to others. To be agents of healing and hope and especially reconciliation, not only in the church, but in our world that is desperate for it.

It’s true that Church as the Body of Christ has historically struggled to listen—to the voices of women, to people of color, to gays and lesbians, to those differently abled physically or cognitively. Eventually, slowly, we begin to get it, because Jesus keeps insisting.

Listening is one of the muscles we continually need to develop as people of faith. It is deeply difficult, and we can’t do it alone. Not all of us are therapists, nor can all of us afford them. It’s why we need God’s help, God’s presence. The English word “listen” has linguistic connections to the Latin word “obey.” We obey Jesus’ command to love one another when we heed our Baptismal Covenant’s exhortation to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving, and listening to, our neighbor as ourself. And



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when we gather in Christ's name and pray for his presence, there he is in midst of us. When *we* are fully present, we have the chance to listen not only to him, but to one another. And the healing begins.

Amen.