

How to Listen in the Community of Christ

Deuteronomy 6:4, Acts 2:1-8

Today's sermon is about how to listen to one another in the community of Christ. It is part of the human condition: how difficult it is to listen. The human condition is a tiny figure alone in the vast universe saying: "Please listen to me".

As the Board of Worship was planning the Season of Grace and its theme "the Renewal of Community", the need for a sermon on "How to Listen" was suggested. So, to use a biblical phrase "incline your ears", as we try to incline our ears to one another.

I

To be listened to, really listened to, is a deeply healing thing. It says "you matter". I remember years ago moving to Charlotte and trying to find a new physician to take me as a patient and write some prescriptions I needed. I walked into the physician's office and sat down. As I talked, I had the deep sense that she was listening to me, listening deeply to my words, listening to *me*. It felt like healing had already begun—before any prescriptions had been filled.

Listening is not just an auditory act; it is a spiritual act.

III

Our faith itself is centered in hearing and listening. Paul said, “faith comes in *hearing*” (Romans 10:12). The great Hebrew creed, sung at every Jewish worship service is called the *Shema*. *Shema* means “Hear” and the first words of the creed are: “Hear O Israel!” (Deuteronomy 6:4) Israel was formed as a listening community, a people listening to God, for God. To tune your ears to listen to God helps you tune your ears to listen to one another.

In the Pentecost story we often focus on the miracle of *speaking*, speaking in “unknown tongues”. But the greater miracle was the miracle of *hearing*, hearing and understanding, people hearing and understanding even when the other was speaking in another language, “How is it that we hear?”, the text goes (Acts 2:8). The Spirit helps us to hear and listen—which we all need because we are pretty lousy at it.

When the United Nations convenes with people from many nations and tongues, ear phones are supplied so the delegates can hear and understand what the speaker is saying no matter what language is being spoken. I’ve wished for such a magical device in church to help us hear and understand one another, even with our different languages.

Alan Greenspan, the noted economist quipped:

I know you think you understand what you thought I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.

That should be put on every refrigerator. The Human Condition.

“Women speak Venus, Men speak Mars.” There is Democrat-speak and Republican speak, liberal jargon and conservative jargon, and our languages do not meet.

We might even say we all have our own most personal and private language and that it is so difficult to speak it so we can be heard and understood. To listen, to truly listen, is to hear and understand the uniqueness of every person's own personal language.

When St. Benedict formed the Benedictine monastic order fifteen hundred years ago, he wrote *The Rule of St. Benedict*. It was the basis of life together in monastic community, about how to live in community. One of the four vows of the monk (in addition to Poverty, Chastity and Obedience) was the Vow of Stability which said that the monk would stay in that same monastic community for his entire life unless moved by the Abbot. Same faces, same habits, same quirks, same irritations—all their lives! *The Rule of St. Benedict* has 73 rules, with a chapter on each! They needed every one! So might we! We would be helped, I think, if we studied it together!

The first words of the *Rule* in its Prologue go:

Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instruction, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. ¹

A few years back I spent a month next to St. John's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery, for a month of writing. I worshipped every day with the monks, and it has left an indelible impression on me. I met there a colorful monk named Luigi Bertocchi. You might guess he was from Italy. One day he talked with me about that first sentence and the kind of hearing needed to "listen".

He had spent some time in a monastery in Japan and learned their language. He drew for me the two Japanese words, or pictograms, for "to hear" and "to listen". The first pictogram had in it the figure for an ear and a door. The door looked like one of those swinging half-doors you see in a restaurant. The pictogram pictured hearing as a person going by the door listening then moving on. This is the more superficial way of hearing. How often do we listen to another with our minds already on the way somewhere else?

The second pictogram was for the deep kind of listening that we all want and all need. The figures in it depict an ear, a heart and the number 14. It means to *listen with 14 hearts*. That's the kind of listening that the Rule of St. Benedict was talking about. To listen with 14 hearts is the kind of listening we hunger for

and hope to offer others. This is listening as a form of love. To be understood is to be loved. To seek to understand is the activity of love.

So the first part of “how to listen” can be summed up in two words: “Take time”. It takes time to truly listen. What if we went to someone and said, “I want to listen to you with 14 hearts, and I’m going to take the time needed to do so!”

IV

Our culture doesn’t help. From our manifold cultural divides we talk at and past each other. There was an old Miller Lite beer commercial some of you may be old enough to remember. There were two crowds on opposite sides of a football stadium. One side is yelling at the top of their lungs: “Tastes Great!” the other side is yelling “Less Filling!” That’s America today, yelling our slogans at each other across the cultural and political divides. One side yells “Freedom”, the other side yells “Equality!” Fascist! Communist! Socialist! Racist! And there’s this new word “woke”. A point of pride for some, of derision for another. We toss words at each other with little meaning conveyed.

The church lives inevitably in culture, not outside it, and so are formed by our culture. We bring our culture to church. We bring our Fox language and our MSNBC language with us, our bumper sticker slogans, words with little shared currency.

We must let loose of our cultural conditioning if we are to listen. The Gospel helps us transcend our tribal languages. It is part of the gospel itself! The Holy Spirit helps us listen with 14 hearts.

V

Listening is a spiritual act. It requires a silencing of the mind and a quieting of the heart. It opens up a space within where we can truly listen and seek understanding. A pre-occupied mind cannot listen. A mind that thinks it knows what the other person is going to say before they say it cannot truly listen. A heart entrenched with certain feelings about another cannot listen. To listen is to be willing to be changed in the listening. A mind silenced, a mind quieted can be a listening heart and mind.

A Japanese university professor came to visit a Zen Master named *Nan-in*. He wanted to learn about Zen Buddhism. The master first invited him to tea. He poured the visitor's cup full, then kept pouring the tea, overflowing the cup, tea splashing on the table. The visitor exclaimed "It is over-full! No more will go in!" The master said, "Your mind is full. How am I to show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"²

So with listening. How can we listen when our minds are so full? First empty your cup.

Henri Nouwen has written much about the spiritual gift of *hospitality*. It is about far more than the opening of your home to others. It is, he says, the creation of a safe space where another can enter and be who they are without fear. The church should be such a space. We as persons can be such a space.

Listening is the spiritual gift of hospitality. You create a safe space for sharing. We do not assume we know what the other person means by what they say. Sometimes it is good to say: "I am not sure what you mean. Would you say that again?" Sometimes we need to be brave to say to the listener, "I do not think you understood what I am trying to say". We must, again, take time, be willing to slow down the conversation.

VI

A leading Buddhist writer and teacher, Jack Kornfield, says that when he chose to become a monk and enter a monastery, he was given the instruction: "Bow to everyone who has joined the monastery before you". "Wait", he thought to himself, "That means *everyone!*" What about that lazy monk who doesn't take his vows seriously? That blow-hard monk who spouts off all the time!" Then the truth of it hit him. We all deserve honor and respect as a child of God, a spiritual creature.

Listening is a form of bowing. It treats everyone as the unique child of God created in the divine image that they are.

In the St. Francis prayer, “Lord Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace”, we pray:

O Divine Master, grant that I may
 not so much seek to be consoled
 as to console
 to be understood as to understand....

And we would add today, “to be listened to as to listen.”

“Hear O Israel!” “Listen my son.” “Incline thine ear.” O God, Christ, Spirit help us, your community, to listen.

Amen.

1. *The Rule of St. Benedict* ed. Timothy Fry (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1998), p.3.
2. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1975),p.54.