

LISTEN AND RESPOND IN LOVE

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"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Those words from Deuteronomy, spoken by Moses to the Israelite people before they finally left the wilderness and entered into the promised land, hold a great deal of meaning and importance. They are often referred to as the Shema. *Shema* is the Hebrew word for listen, or hear. And the Hebrew people repeated these words over and over again throughout the Old Testament. They were, and still are to this day, an important daily prayer in Judaism, and one with a lot of meaning packed into just a few words. The Shema is the centrepiece of Deuteronomy, and to fully appreciate it you must have a deeper understanding of what this Hebrew word "listen" really means. You, see, *shema* not only means listen, but it also means "pay attention": Pay attention, O Israel. *Shema* also means respond, or take action, or obey.

In Hebrew, listening and doing are two sides of the same coin. You can't truly listen without also responding. You can't truly hear unless you also obey. Now, obey is a word that can come across as quite harsh: as a command that might force others to do things they aren't comfortable with, or don't agree with. It's a word that implies a potential power imbalance, rules or laws that must be followed, complete compliance. And this is absolutely true in certain contexts. But in Hebrew, the words "hear" and "obey" are the same word: *shema*. There isn't an English equivalent. In Hebrew, to say that you *shema* means you both hear and obey, or hear and respond. This is because responding to what you hear is a form of obedience. You make the active choice to listen and then respond to the truth that God is the one true God, and the appropriate response, or way to obey, is to love God with all of your being.

In the same way that *shema* is more than just listening in a cerebral way, love is more than sentiment—it is also action. In the *Shema*, Israel is supposed to respond to God's love by showing love to God in return. And just like God's love, human love is to show itself through action. We show our love for God by how we treat the people around us. And so, this is what *shema* is really getting at: listening, hearing, responding, acting, obeying, all in the name of our one true God, all in the name of love.

And this love is intense. It's not to be taken lightly. The Israelites lived in a time where your heart was believed to be the centre for many different things: it was the source of physical

life, it was where you felt emotion, it was the place where thought stemmed from, and where you figured out how to make sense of the world, how to make choices. So, to love the Lord your God with all your heart means loving with all of who you are physically, intellectually, emotionally, and through the choices you make. It involves every element of your being. And most of all, it involves a response. Loving cannot be done through words alone, or listening alone; it requires action. Hear, O Israel. Hear and respond. Hear and obey. Listen and love.

When we turn to our Gospel story from Mark, knowing what we do about the *Shema*, it's no wonder Jesus replies to the scribe the way he does. In the verses preceding today's reading, Jesus has been grilled by various Jewish leaders about his beliefs, about Jewish theology, about where he gets his authority. All of these leaders are actively trying to find holes in Jesus' answers; they are seeking a reason to turn Jesus away and prove to all his followers that he is not worth following. If they can find a hole in his argument, then they can show he's a fraud. If they can point out his lack of understanding of Jewish faith and theology, then they can take centre stage once more as the most authoritative teachers and leaders. So, when this scribe addresses Jesus, we already have a sense that everyone who approaches Jesus does so with the intention of entrapping him.

But this scribe is different. He has listened to the debates and disputes between the Jewish leaders and Jesus, and he recognizes how well Jesus answers. Whether he hopes to entrap Jesus with his question, or genuinely wants to hear Jesus' thoughts, we don't know, but he does ask difficult question: "which commandment is the first of all?"

With hundreds of commandments that the Jewish people were expected to follow, this question could easily be asked in earnest or asked as a means to entrap. Jesus' answer, though, finds common ground between himself and the Jewish leaders, including this scribe. He speaks to the rich heritage that has provided the foundation for his own teaching and ministry: he recites the *Shema*. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." How could any Jewish leader deny these words that are prayed daily and that draw forth absolute devotion, commitment, and obedience to God from every part of their being: heart, soul, mind, strength? They can't. And, Jesus continues: the second most important commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself.

The shocking part of this story comes after Jesus says those words. The scribe who confronted him carefully considers what Jesus has said. He, in fact, does what the *shema* asks of him: he listens and responds according to God's command to love. And he stands in solidarity with Jesus. "You are right, Teacher," the scribe states, "you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Through his listening, the scribe realizes that temple rituals, like burnt offerings, have their place and represent important beliefs within Jewish faith, but they are not nearly as important as loving God and loving others. And perhaps it's the suddenly obvious truth of what Jesus has said, now laid out before them, or perhaps it's due to embarrassment over been shown up by Jesus once more, but the scripture tells us that the Jewish leaders don't dare ask him another question.

You see, the thing is, these Jewish leaders haven't really been listening. They ask Jesus their questions and don't really listen to, or *shema*, Jesus' answers. Certainly they have heard what Jesus said in a cognitive way, but they have not listened in a wholistic way. They refuse to respond or take action in a manner that truly reflects what Jesus has said. Their desire to remain in authority, to keep religious life as it is and always has been, is a greater priority for them. And the scribe who asked about the greatest commandment suddenly sees this. In hearing what Jesus has to say, he uses this common text to critique his own corner of the religious world. The scribe, in attempting to love God with heart and soul, with mind and strength, loves religion less. For the moment, at least, he has put his whole trust in the unity of God revealed in Scripture's greatest commandment, rather than in the religious practices and pronouncements stipulated by human authorities that divide. A risky pronouncement to make, given the situation, but one that leaves the listeners silent.

And the thing with listening, real listening, is that sometimes the best response is silence. Or, at least silence in terms of not speaking out loud; a reflective silence. One where we create space to think and consider the best way to respond before we speak words from our mouth, or even before we engage in physical action. How many of us have listened to someone else's story only long enough to get to the point where you can jump in with your own story? Or, how many of us have been confronted with change or with a new idea and immediately shut it down because it seems too impossible to tackle, or too strange or uncomfortable and therefore not worth the effort? How did you react when you first heard

the phrase “Black Lives Matter?” Were you on board with it right away, or did you immediately respond with “Wait... all lives matter!”

I have to admit that, a number of years ago now, when I first heard the retort that “All lives matter” in response to “Black lives matter,” I thought, “Yeah, all lives *do* matter.” I began to wonder if maybe the Black Lives Matter organization needed to adjust their name. I even tried to think of it in theological terms; I figured God loves us all equally, so perhaps “Black lives matter” wasn’t the most appropriate term to use. But then I started listening more deeply and intentionally to the voices of, not privileged white people, but Black people. And through that time of deeper listening and reflecting, I allowed my heart to be transformed in a way that helped me to really see, understand and empathize with the injustices that Black people have to grapple with each day in this country and around the world. I came to understand why “Black Lives Matter” is a strong and important statement. I began to better understand the privileges I hold and face my own racial prejudices. I’m still no where near perfect, and in fact, I never will be, because as a white woman I will never be able to fully understand what it is to be a Black person in this world. So instead, I listen to their stories, and I reflect, and I try to respond with a heart transformed by love—not guilt, or shame, or pride, or fear—love.

Maybe it’s not just Black Lives Matter that got you listening or questioning or reflecting. What was your reaction when you first heard the phrase “Defund the police”? Or #metoo? What about when you were first told that the proper and appropriate term is “Indigenous” and not “Indian”? Or when you first heard someone say that homosexuality is not a sin? Maybe you were on board right away. But more likely one or all of these examples made you come to a sudden halt. Because new and strange and different makes us uncomfortable. The key is not to ignore those feelings, but to embrace them. It is in this embracing that we open our ears, our eyes, our minds, our hearts to the ways that we can align God’s love for us with our love for others and work toward human flourishing in this world.

As we take time to truly listen to God, we observe God’s empathy and justice towards the afflicted, changing how we think, feel, and act. Listening can mean evaluating how we have benefitted from or participated in systems of oppression like racism or injustice, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Truly listening means being compelled to do something about it. Signing that petition instead of deleting it. Attending that protest. Speaking up and educating others. Donating our time or our wealth. Adjusting our language. Admitting

when we were wrong. And recognizing that the call to listen and respond and be transformed is constant; it never ends. This is Kingdom of God work.

This is why we gather as the Church. To listen, to reflect, to respond: to *shema*. To reflect on our one true God and respond to God's unending love for us by showing our love for God. And reminding ourselves of the ways we can show that love: by obeying God's command to love one another. And we do this as a community because we have to hear different voices in order to be able to reflect. If we only hear our own voices, or only listen to the voices of those who we already agree with, we aren't responding in love; we are responding with indifference, apathy, selfishness, or even hate. We are a diverse community called together by God, and through our diversities we are called to love through listening, learning, reflecting, and responding. This is why we gather for worship. This is why we have Bible studies and book studies. This is why we have Sunday school and camp. This is why we run educational events. This is why we gather around the table for Communion. This is why we engage in forms of fellowship. Because it gives us opportunities to listen to one another, to hear new perspectives, to reflect, and be transformed through love.

Hear, O people of the World; The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, and love others as you love yourself.

Amen