

Ongoing Congregational Conversation

Matthew 18:15-20

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 25) 2023

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*Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of Sins continually.*

-William Blake, *Jerusalem*

Saint Teresa of Calcutta, formerly Mother Teresa, was once asked, “What do you do when you pray? She answered, “Listen.” They responded, “What does God do?” She replied, “Listen.”

In Judaism, the Shema begins, “Hear O Israel. The Lord our God is One.” Or as many rabbis have translated that first word, “Listen!” That’s our initial posture. Listening. We listen first. We listen to God. And we listen to others.

Our entire faith and way of life is to be shaped by listening first. We know that in Christ, God took the initiative for our liberation and the liberation of the entire world. Our task is to respond. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In turn, we are to listen to the Word. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his little book about how to live together in Christian community and how to survive in a hostile environment: “God’s love is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God’s Word but also lends us God’s ear” (*Life Together*, p. 98).

This shapes how we do everything. We listen to Scripture. We listen in prayer. We listen to others and listen for God through them.

In a world of prattle, we listen and discern – patiently – before we speak. In the echo chambers of social media, the shouting at others on Twitter (or “X”), we

discipline ourselves so that our habit is to listen first. In our marriages and families, we listen, then we speak. All day, every day, politicians give us double-speak, advertising exaggerates, bureaucrats obfuscate, entertainment distracts, racists use code language and dog whistles, and we are constantly barraged by propaganda, misinformation, and downright lies – all which theologian William Stringfellow called “babel.” And babel has become the prevailing form of existence. Confusion reigns and, as a result, we are unable to resist the Powers which seek to dominate us and our world.

Christ calls us be a people who know the truth when we hear it because we listen first – listen to God and to God’s word and listen to each other.

In Matthew 18 Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you,” And then Jesus gives us a detailed process for dealing with conflicts. Again, and again, Jesus talks about listening in this passage. If we listen to one another or if we do not listen, Jesus gives us a certain process of conversation. Dialogue of one kind or another is always going on. This is what theologian James McClendon calls the “ongoing conversation of the community” (*Ethics*, 226). This ongoing conversation, dialogue, and listening shapes how we do everything.

I want you to note that the verbs in this passage are continuous action verbs. In other words, what’s going on here is ongoing. This is not a one-time event. This is life together. All the time. Every day.

The great English poet William Blake said, “Friendship cannot exist without forgiveness of sins continually.” He got it right. Listening, being open to a word that comes from outside of us, learning to be forgiven and forgive, is to be a daily process. We practice it over and over.

Most New Testament scholars believe that Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. It contains the most explicit references to the Law of Moses and consistently shows Jesus Christ is the new Moses giving us the New Law. But what helps protect the community of faith from legalism to the New Law is this ongoing dialogue and conversation. McClendon says that we are “meeting and talking things over” (p. 237) in a “combination of fluidity and complexity” (p. 231) all the time. Sometimes it is a formal meeting but most of the time, it is informal – conversations in the parking lot or over coffee or a shared meal, or sitting on each other’s porches, and so on. We meet and talk things over as we try to figure out what Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount about turning the other cheek in a world that seems to be much too eager to hit us. Or what does it look like to go the second mile or love our enemies or to be peacemakers while everyone seems to be toting guns these days? Or we talk about learning to pray, and then we pray together. Or we talk about where we messed up, made mistakes, and failed God and failed one another. All of this, and more, we talk about and discern. We pay attention, we attend, we wait.

Carlyle Marney, the great Baptist preacher of a generation ago, talked about a couple of preacher boys coming to see him. He said they were full of themselves and eagerly told him of their plans and ideas to improve the church and the great things for God they were going to do. He said, “They were going to bring in the kingdom with bulldozers.” Marney went on to observe, “You know, we rarely talk someone into the kingdom of God.” He paused. “We might listen a few in, though.”

Instead of bulldozing our way through or always talking about what we think needs to be done, what if listening shaped us? If we had that deep humility, where we are always open to a word from the Other, imagine how things might

change. If we could humbly be open to God, the world, and each other, so that even in conflict, we could practice dialogue and active listening, I wonder if we could be a part of God healing the torn fabric of this world?

Jesus says, if we believe that someone sins against us. Someone has offended me or hurt me or spoken ill of me, or committed some sin, my responsibility is to go to them and talk about it. I do not go to shake my finger at them but to show them where they've offended. And if they refuse to hear, then I go back with two or three witnesses and speak to them again. If that does not work, then it becomes a matter for the wider congregation to listen to and speak. And if the offensive person still refuses, then they've made their choice – they obviously do not wish to remain part of the community and are placing themselves outside the fellowship. All the community does is recognize it.

The goal is not expressing righteous indignation or revenge or venting our anger or rage. The goal is restoration of the offender. The goal is reparation. The goal is being a community that trusts one another and knows that when the chips are down, it can rely on one another; that we have each other's backs.

This is the model of how we are to deal with conflict and brokenness. We listen, and then, out of our listening we speak.

You might remember the old joke of the fellow who was traveling in another country and in the marketplace came upon an extraordinary talking bird. Not simply a parrot who repeated a few words or phrases over and over, this bird talked in sentences. The man was so taken he bought the bird and knowing that his mother would appreciate such a gift, at great expense he had the bird shipped to his mom back in the States.

When he got home, he called his mom, “Mom, did you get the bird I sent? An amazing bird, don’t you think?” His mom said, “Thank you, Son. It was one of the best tasting birds I’ve ever eaten.”

“Mom, what?! You ate the bird?! I can’t believe it! It was a talking bird. An uncommon talking bird! I can’t believe you ate the bird!” His mom said, “Well, it should have said something.”

Sometimes we have to say something. Even if it is hard. Sometimes we have to sit down with a friend, someone we love, and in humility speak to them of their offense. It is hard.

It is even harder when I’m that someone who has committed the offense. For example, part of the challenge for the White church in this country is learning to listen to people of color.

In society, in church, and in our families and relationships, it is not easy to patiently listen to accusation and how we hurt someone and realize that we’re responsible. Or hear that we participate in an injustice that is larger than we realized or recognized. Perhaps we were oblivious or looked the other way. It is easy to respond with denial – “This never happened.” Or “I didn’t do that.” Or to immediately counter-accuse – “But you have your problems too!” Instead, our calling is to listen with patience. Remember that patience means giving up control. So, we listen without controlling the conversation.

Somewhere in this world of shouting accusations and counteraccusations, denial, and putting heads in the sand, there has to be people who are willing to hear a counter word, an uncomfortable word. And in listening to a word that is counter to what is comfortable, we can learn to discern the truth. God calls us to be a

community based upon truth – listening patiently, without control, open to a counter word. This is how we become a people who know the truth when they hear it, no matter how hard it might be. It is how we become a people who empathize, put ourselves in someone else’s shoes and begin to understand what they’re lives are like.

The entire book of Acts is the story of the fledgling church meeting together and talking things out as they sought to follow the Way of Jesus. In Acts 6 they talked over what to do when the Greek-speaking widows complained to the majority Aramaic-speaking that they were being discriminated against in the distribution of food. The majority listened. And they realized that the Greek speakers were correct. In response, they appointed seven men of fine reputations, who had Greek surnames, to oversee the distribution of the food.

The book of Acts continues with story after story of the church encountering new people and new challenges and therefore, the church was in continuous conversation: “What do we do with Samaritans and eunuchs and Roman officers and all these Gentiles, who want to follow Jesus? Must they become Jews first and then become Christ-followers? Or can they become disciples of Jesus as they are?”

In Acts 15, there was a big meeting and Luke tells us “There was much debate” (Acts 15:7). Peter rose to speak, reminding everyone that it is by the grace of God that any of us are saved. Then Paul and Barnabas spoke and said the same thing. Luke says in verse 12, the whole assembly kept silence, and listened. Finally, after talking things over, the whole congregation agreed with Peter and Paul and Barnabas saying, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15: 28).

There are times when we have those occasional big moments like in Acts 2 at Pentecost, where on a Sunday morning, the Holy Spirit blows through our midst

in big, inspiring, life changing ways. Or perhaps a big Acts 15 meeting. But most of the time, we have lots of Acts 6 and Acts 8 and 9 and 10 moments – those small, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday recurring, ongoing conversations where we listen and learn that we do not understand each other, and some of us learn that we suppress others’ voices and have not listened. And where we learn the specifics of how some of us claim too much while others have too little. These recurring, ongoing conversations do not just happen. We have to be intentional; we have to make an effort, and we have to stick to it. But it is essential to being the church.

Have you ever seen a starling murmuration? Starlings, a small black bird native to Europe were brought to North America in the 1890’s and now are found throughout the U.S. but are most numerous in wide-open grasslands. Because of our forests, we do not have as many in East Texas. A murmuration of starlings is a flock of thousands of birds, sometimes two or three hundred thousand or more, flying together in extraordinary fluidity and coordination in various patterns and directions, all together. And it’s called a murmuration because of the quiet, low murmur thousands of bird wings make as they fly and roost near one another. Look them up sometime and watch some videos. They are incredible and beautiful.

There is no single definitive explanation for why starlings murmurate. Scientists believe that a possible explanation is that murmurations can help the starlings keep warm in the evening by roosting close to one another. But scientists theorize that the behavior also helps protect the birds from predators. Moving in tandem as a single large entity both confuses predators and lowers the risk for each individual bird, a phenomenon called the “dilution effect.”

It is interesting and often dramatic when hawks or peregrine falcons attack, screaming at 180 miles per hour through thousands of starlings. The starlings

dodge and veer away as one organic whole while the predator is unable to focus on one single starling and often gives up confused and exhausted. Scientists believe the togetherness of the starlings also intimidates the predator. Lone starlings are easy pickings for a hawk. Murmurations protect.

Scientists have a more difficult time explaining, how the birds can move in such proximity, with their movements so tightly coordinated, never colliding with one another. Murmurations have no single leader or group of leaders. Studies have found that each starling attends to and responds to five or six of its nearest neighbors. A single starling can simultaneously listen and watch with these five or six neighbors at one time, constantly coordinating its movements with those five or six. In turn, the others are doing the same, on and on until hundreds of thousands move through the sky as one.

The late nature writer, Barry Lopez, said that if human beings are to survive, we must learn to operate like murmurations of starlings. He says in starling murmurations, there are no lone heroes, no lone leader. Instead, what is heroic is the murmuration, the community. Wisdom and insight are not in the individual; they are in the community constantly attending to one another, listening, communicating. It is ongoing. And that ongoing communication does not initially happen with all 200,000 birds. It happens among five or six. All the time (see David James Duncan, *Sun House*, Acknowledgements, p. 768-769).

I think it is interesting that Jesus summarizes his teaching on the ongoing process of listening and speaking and forgiveness with these words, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20).



Changing the world does not happen all at once. It happens among two or three of us, or five or six, listening, paying attention, speaking, and forgiving. All the time.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.