

Talking Things Over
Matthew 18:15-20
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 6) 2020
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Declarations of confession (which remake the self) and forgiveness (which restore relationships) are counteractions to evil.

- Terrence W. Tilley

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it in his usual provocative style, “Forgiveness means that our enemy gets to tell us who we are.” Stanley’s emphasis is the startling reminder from Jesus’ teaching in our reading today from Matthew 18 that at the heart of being the church is the practice of dialogue and the heart of dialogue is listening: listening to God and listening to each other. This includes listening to those who might threaten us or those we don’t understand. Our task is to hear and to 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!” We are taught, we are trained, and we are formed so that our initial posture is to listen. We listen first. We listen to God. And we listen to others.

Our entire faith and way of life is shaped by listening first. We know that in Christ, God took the initiative for our salvation and the salvation 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. This shapes how we do everything. We listen to Scripture. We listen in prayer. We listen to others and listen for God through them. We listen to hear what wisdom they might have because we know that we do not

know everything. We listen to empathize, to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine ourselves from their perspective. And we listen for their correction. It is true, that the other person is to listen to us, as well, but even then, indeed, most especially then, our initial posture is of a humble listener.

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.

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. All of this, and more, we talk about and discern. We listen to the Holy Spirit, to the Scripture, and to each other.

Carlyle Marney, the great Baptist preacher of a generation ago, talked about a couple of preacher boys coming to see him years ago. 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 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 whole 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 repairing the torn fabric of the congregation. The goal is reparation, reconciliation, wholeness, and the healed relationship, the healed community, the healed creation.

This is the model of how we are to deal with conflict and brokenness. This is how we dialogue, and it shapes how we are to do larger dialogues in the larger world.

It is hard to sit down with a friend, someone you 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. Part of the challenge for the White church in this country is learning to listen to people of color. As White people, we are accustomed to thinking that we know it all and the way we've set up this world, while it needs some fine-tuning, is overall a good thing. But what if we listen and learn that it is not such a good thing? What if we hear something we don't like?

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. The Other

gets to tell us who we are, and we give up control on what they say, how they say it, and how it feels to us.

There is a lot of riding on our ability to listen and hear. Somewhere in this world of shouting accusations and counter-accusations, 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.

Talking things over is not incidental to the church. It is central to who the church is. We are to come out of our offices and studies, turn off our computers and put our phones in our pockets, turn off our TV, and actually talk to and with one another. We are always dialoguing, always listening, always learning, always hearing the new word from the God is who the Word made flesh.

Now, I know, right now under social distancing, we are limited. I know. But we will not be like this forever. And second, let’s start exploring how we can practice appropriate distancing, in small groups, yet still get together in each

other's yards or at the park or somewhere outdoors, where we can listen and learn and be together.

The first Sunday in October (Oct. 4), Austin Heights has been invited to go over and join Iron Wheel Baptist Church in their parking lot worship service. We'll all stay in our cars and it won't be the same as when we are able to be together in the same building, but it will still be an opportunity to listen – listen to God and listen to one another, and perhaps hear something we need to hear.

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