

Listen and Love – Bob Munshaw

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

I grew up knowing little to nothing about the church year. I am sure that we probably celebrated Advent in some way, but I totally would have thought of it merely as Christmas season and not really as any kind of a time to prepare my heart for the coming of Jesus. I may have heard of Lent, but if I had, I am certain I would have thought of it as some sort of strange, possibly pagan Catholic ritual. The Christian calendar I grew up with included Thanksgiving, Christmas, revivals (which could come at any time in the church year), Easter and camp meetings. The Season of Epiphany was not a thing, nor were most feast days ... though I wish that we would begin to observe feast days again.

The Season of Epiphany will end next Sunday with Transfiguration Sunday, but we should be reminded that this season in the life of the church is to be observed as a time of spiritual growth, and hence the liturgical color is green, reminiscent of living plants. The passages for this week are very fitting then, especially our Gospel reading as it challenges us to **Listen** to what we are being called to as followers of Jesus.

The first verse of our gospel reading, Jesus says, *But I say to you that listen ...* And then we really get it from Jesus for twelve verses here, don't we?—all sorts of admonitions here ... all sorts of instructions. Jesus gets on a roll here, and just keeps bringing the heat! And on top of that, we can't forget that this is just a piece of a longer message called the Sermon on the Plain. Last week, Rick reminded us of just who were the blessed, right? Who did Jesus say are blessed?—and on whom did Jesus pronounce WOE? (the rich)

But between the teaching from last week, and the ethical teachings from Jesus in our gospel text for this week, we have this little introductory phrase: *But I say to you that listen.*

I don't hear well at all in my left ear. I went to a "hearing person" a couple years ago because I was curious as to how bad it was. I believe the word she used to describe my hearing loss was "profound". It's been a problem for a while. It is the main reason I don't take a turn at the altar during the anointing time for healing—hard to pray for someone's needs when you can't really make out what they are, and I don't really want to ask the person if they can share their requests a lot louder so that I—and everyone else in church—can hear them.

I'm not sure what caused my hearing loss really. I can't remember when I first really noticed it, either. It may trace back to my infancy where I had a number of significant physical ailments that left me in the hospital most of my first year of life. More likely, it stems from one of two or three things. I worked in a factory for six or seven summers while I was in college. We were supposed to wear hearing protection at work, but I was young and stupid, and didn't listen well, so I did not always put in the ear plugs. I also really liked to listen to music, and as I was young and stupid, I did abide by the mantra that if it is too loud, then you are too old. I've also been smacked in the head numerous times by hockey pucks, and probably by my mom, because I was young and stupid and didn't always listen. Either way, there you have it. I usually am fine in public, and I am sure that one day I will break down and get some type of hearing aid, but

because it rarely bothers me in public, I don't really think about it or worry about it. I hear well enough.

Ahhh ... but then there is home life, and here we have found that there is a very important difference between hearing and listening. As in public situations, for the most part, I can hear everything that Jen says. However, she rightly questions whether or not I am listening to her ... especially if there is a hockey game on in front of me, or if I am looking at my phone. If I want to be a good husband, I need to pause and focus and really listen and not just say "Uh huh" at what I think are the appropriate times. To listen means to pay attention and to concentrate and to think of what the other person is really saying

And how much more important is it for me to pay attention if Jesus is saying to listen??! The gospel writers regularly record Jesus telling the people to really hear him. For example, in Luke 14, we find Jesus speaking to the crowds about what it might cost them to follow him. He gives several examples of how tough it might be, and he concludes by saying *Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!* (NLT)

Luke 8 is all about the way in which we hear. In the narrative of the parable of the sower, hearing is mentioned 8 times, all with the idea of listening and paying attention to what is being said.

Listen to Jesus' words in chapter 8, verses 18 and 21 (NLT): *So pay attention to how you hear. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what they think they understand will be taken away from them. ... Jesus replied, "My mother and my brothers are all those who hear God's word and obey it."*

In our passage, we are challenged over and over again with ethical commands. Ready for them?

Listen to what Jesus says

Love your enemies

Be good to those who hate you

Bless those who curse you

Pray for those who abuse you

Turn the other cheek

Give your coat and shirt!

Give to those who beg from you

Golden rule!: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Love your enemies ... (Wait!! Stop!! Were you really listening? Did you notice that Jesus said that twice? Love your enemies. Maybe Jesus said it twice because he thinks it is important!!)

Do good

Lend, and expect nothing in return

Be merciful

Do not judge

Do not condemn

Forgive

Give

I want to invite you to see that this is not a comprehensive list. Some people want to read the Bible so literally, that if something is not mentioned in it, we are free to do it.

If we only seek to literally follow the Bible, we can become like the Irish boxer who became a Christian evangelist. One day as he was setting up his tent for meetings, some local thugs came and began to heckle him. One of them took a swing at the preacher and hit him on the cheek knocking him to the ground. He got up and pointed to his other cheek and said, “Jesus told me to offer you this one also.” So the guy clobbered him again, knocking him to the ground. The boxer-turned-preacher rose slowly to his feet, took off his jacket and said, “Jesus gave me no further instructions.” POW!

We can justify all sorts of things if we woodenly and literally interpret the Bible, but ... But ... if we listen, we hear Jesus talking here and throughout the Gospels about love. He talks about it, he gives examples of what it looks like, and he lives it in the way that he treats others.

This passage, this sermon of Jesus’, though full of action words, must be seen as a call to love, grace and mercy—with ourselves and towards others. It is about really being disciples, people who listen to Jesus and follow Jesus. It is about real faith. It is about the values of the upside-down kingdom of God becoming our values. We may have all sorts of reasons to not like someone, to be angry at someone or some group. We may have just cause to hold hatred or anger in our hearts towards a person. I can certainly think of people who have hurt me deeply, and if I am honest, I am certain that I have done things to hurt others as well. The way of Jesus, the path that Jesus is calling us to as his followers, is to let go of that hate and that anger and to learn to forgive and to choose to love. And of course, the word for love that Jesus uses in this text is “Agape,” which is the divine, selfless love which will go to any length to attain the wellbeing of its object. Did you get that? The love that Jesus is calling us to is a selfless love that will go to any length to attain the wellbeing of the other. That is not the warm fuzzy feeling; that is a hard choice to do something that does not come naturally, and that we do not want to do.

If we turn to our passage from Genesis this morning, we are seeing something of the same thing. If anybody had a right to hold deep hostility in his heart, it was Joseph. His brothers had thrown him into a pit with plans to kill him. Then they sold him as a slave and told their father that he was dead. You all know the Joseph story. Things end up great, with him as second in command in all of Egypt to the Pharaoh, but the road to get there was hardly easy, including time served as a slave and Joseph spending well over two years in the king’s jail on a false accusation.

Joseph had plenty of reasons to see his brothers as his enemies and to hold a deep resentment and even hatred in his heart for them. And Joseph is obviously deeply emotional about reuniting with his brothers, and he is hardly perfect in his actions towards them. You remember how he played mean-spirited mind games with them, and then sent them away, first with their silver in their bags, and then with the silver cup hidden in Benjamin’s sack. We can clean up the story as much as we want, but Joseph made his brothers suffer a fair bit before revealing himself. It certainly seems to show that in some ways he did continue to carry his brokenness and resentment

Of course the story of Joseph does not end with him tormenting his brothers, and we get that in our reading for today. Eventually, Joseph reveals himself to them, and he does choose to forgive them and to love them.

In the totality of the Joseph narrative, Joseph certainly shows immaturity at times, especially early on in his life, but he also demonstrates a consistent trust in God and faithfulness to God in the midst of his slavery and his time in jail. He also eventually sees in his brothers' evil actions the ways that God has opened doors to provide for so many, including his own family in the famine.

May we have eyes to see and ears to hear and to listen.

Faith is not just asserting that some propositions about God are true, nor is it a constant striving to somehow earn God's favor through our obedience and works. Being a disciple of Jesus includes paying attention to the teachings of Jesus. Our passage in 1 Corinthians today is perhaps chosen to pair with our other passages to remind us that while we do have hope for a future resurrection, we are also embodied in the here and now, and as Paul words it, we are to be image bearers of the man of heaven. Our Psalm for today invites us to get some perspective. Much like Jesus, we hear the Psalmist saying, "Don't worry about whether or not people that we think are evil, or who we think have wronged us, are going to get their just deserts." He says, *Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil.*

I really enjoy, and am challenged by, the messages I hear at St. Paul's, but too often I go home and forget about them in the busyness of my life. I have no doubt that this is my fault for being a poor listener. But in case you suffer from the same problem as me, I want to leave us with an action step. I invite each of us to take just a bit of time today to prayerfully reflect on who Jesus might be calling us to choose to love, and then invite the Holy Spirit to help us to begin to think of how we can begin to practically begin to love our enemies.

May we have ears to hear how God wants to speak into our lives.