

The 6th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: July 16, 2017

Proper 10: Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23: *Speak Lord, Your Servant is Listening*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Former radio talk show host Larry King once told a hilarious story about listening. It seems that Larry was a guest on a television morning show in Dallas, TX. The woman who interviewed him was the classic host who asks you a question and then looks off in another direction, not paying any attention to what you say in reply. She had five questions written out by someone else and she checked off each question as she asked it. Larry noticed she wasn't listening at all. She was looking at the camera, at the monitor, anywhere but at him. The host's third question was, "What do you think is the secret to being a successful talk show host?" As Larry King started to answer, he saw she was looking at the monitor again, not paying him the slightest bit of attention. So he decided to have a little fun at her expense. He said, "In my case, it's the fact that I'm an agent for the CIA. They get me

good guests and I broadcast signal words on my show or coded messages every night for their agents.” “Without missing a beat,” said Larry King, “she fired off her next question. ‘Can you tell us some of the outstanding guests you’ve had?’” Larry King said that the studio crew dissolved into laughter while the host stared at the monitor completely oblivious to what had just happened.

Our question and our challenge for this week is, how well do we listen? If I asked your spouse how well you listen, what would he or she say? If I asked your employees or your co-workers the same question, how would they respond? If in prayer you asked God, “Lord, how well do I listen, how do you think God would answer?”

So, let’s talk about listening for a few moments. Jesus said, “*LISTEN! A sower went out to sow.* In our Gospel reading today, Jesus gives us the well-known parable of the sower. Now, I think you will agree that Jesus was not interested in teaching us about farming. Jesus is talking about who hear the message of the Gospel. He knew that some of those who hear his teachings will leave having heard nothing. Others after hearing him will make a half-hearted commitment and then fall away. A few will be sincere, but when they get out in the world, they will waver and then wither away. Only a handful will

experience the joy, the new meaning and the purpose that walking in his footsteps can give. The truthfulness of the Gospel message is so obvious to those of us who have entrusted our lives to Jesus Christ. So, why won't people listen to what Christ says? What holds us back? Why does the seed of the Gospel sometimes fall on infertile soil even within the walls of the church? And so I'm asking you as I ask myself: How well do we listen? How well do we listen to others, particularly those closest to us who love us, and how well do we listen to God who loves us beyond our wildest imaginations.

Statistics show that most people do not really listen very well even in the best of circumstances. Even worse, we don't remember much of what we do hear even if we do listen. For example, if I were to ask you how much you remember from my sermon last week, I would venture to say, you don't remember very much, do you? That's why I tell so many stories in my sermons. The point I am trying to make is more easily remembered in the context of a story. I have read studies showing that people remember stories. I use stories to help us remember the things we talk about. I'm sure that's one reason Jesus used so many parables. Jesus used parables, which are a particular kind of story for people to remember that nugget of truth contained in his teaching. The scriptures say that Jesus had much more to say than what is recorded in the Gospels. That's understandable. Jesus never

wrote anything down that we know of except when he wrote in the dirt as he protected the woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death. Jesus never handed out a lesson plan and syllabus. He spoke and he expected his listeners to remember what he said. I'm certain the reason the writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John included so many of Jesus parables in their Gospel was to stir the memories of the reader to remember Jesus teaching. Stories stick with us. Here is the rub. Listening requires attention. Listening requires focus. Listening requires concentration. Listening requires effort. Plain and simple, effective communication is work.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus' emphasis in this parable is not upon the sower or the seed but upon the soil. Jesus is asking, is the condition of the soil receptive to the seed? God is the sower. The Gospel is the seed. The soil is our hearts. The most eloquent preacher or teacher in the world cannot reach the heart that is hardened to the Gospel or the life that is choked with the weeds of worldly concern.

I read a story about woman who became frantic when she discovered her daughter was missing in the Rocky Mountains while they were camping. This woman thrashed and stomped through the woods, screaming her daughter's name. She went back to the campsite and called for help. Within half an hour,

a search team had been organized. It began sweeping the area, calling out the little girl's name at regular intervals the woman sat down on a rock for a moment to rest. She thought, how will I ever my little girl? She was listening for her daughter's voice, but all she could hear was the volunteer search team pounding through the woods, calling to her daughter and to one another. Suddenly she decided that she and the other searchers were making so much noise that they could not hear the girl if she was shouting out or crying. She relayed this information to the others and in moments everyone was silent, standing quietly. The woman listened, nothing. She listened harder. Every pore of her body, every fiber, every muscle strained to hear the one voice she would recognize above all others. Then she heard her little girl calling for her. By carefully listening and following the sound of her voice, the woman was reunited with her daughter.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, sometimes we need to simply get to a quiet place and listen. Of course, listening is a major part of what prayer is all about. We need a time when we can simply spend time in God's presence. Some people call this centering prayer. Mother Teresa once explained to an interviewer that when she prayed, she often said nothing to God. She just listened. When asked what God said to her as she prayed, she answered,

“Nothing! God listens!” Then she added, “If you don’t understand what I am talking about, I can’t explain it to you.”

My sisters and brothers, the psalmist describes it poetically by saying, “*it is the deep speaking to the deep.*” In another place, the Scriptures say that such prayers are “*groanings that cannot be uttered.*” After engaging in this centering kind of prayer, there is the feeling of fullness in the soul, which I liken to eating a good meal. With that sense of fullness comes with it an awareness of God. You see, prayer is the food, the water and the strength for our soul. There is a sense of God’s living and guiding presence within, which leads the disciple of Jesus Christ into encounters with others in which we have opportunities to share something of what God has taught and given us. The disciple of Jesus Christ at prayer is constantly pouring out and filling up our souls with spiritual energy so that we may serve God and our neighbor. If you remember nothing else about this sermon, please remember this. Prayer fills our souls with spiritual energy which is poured out in service.

Author, sociologist and outstanding preacher Tony Campolo tells a great story that took place one day as he stood on a street corner on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. As he was waiting for the traffic light to change, he heard the Duck Lady come up behind him. They called this

homeless woman the Duck Lady because she made an incessant quacking sound wherever she went. She seemed to be omnipresent on campus, so it was no surprise when he heard her, “Quack! Quack! Quack!” There she was, standing beside him. Then, he says, something that verged on the supernatural happened. He turned to her, and she turned to him. Their eyes met and they connected. With all the spiritual energy that had flowed into him during his morning prayers, he focused on her. He didn’t just look at her. He says he looked into her. Somehow he felt empowered to reach down into the depths of her being, and he had an eerie sensation that he had touched her soul. What surprised him even more was that she was doing the same thing to him. He could feel her spiritually pouring herself into him and then, she stopped her quacking. Campolo said, he had never heard of her doing that, but in that moment, she stopped quacking. Then she lifted her eyes and looked around at the sky and the trees and the people nearby, and she said, “It’s wonderful, really is wonderful, isn’t it? It’s really wonderful!” Before he could answer, the traffic light changed, several people rushed by them. As one of them brushed the Duck Lady, he watched her head jerk ever so slightly. Then she fell back into her schizophrenic state. As she wandered across the street and disappeared into a crowd, he once again heard the quacking sound. Standing motionless on that street corner, he wondered to himself what might

have happened if he could have held on to her just a little longer, perhaps just a minute or two more. Then, maybe, the deliverance would not have been temporary. Just maybe, something more might have happened.

You see, my sisters and brothers, Tony Campolo clearly understood the Duck Lady's need for the help of a psychotherapist or a psychiatrist. But, when the psychotherapists and psychiatrists have done all that they can to no avail, I believe there is still "a balm in Gilead" that can heal the troubled soul. That balm becomes available to us in prayer, when the Holy Spirit saturates the human soul.

My sisters and brothers, in centering prayer, something happens that is strange and blessed. You can feel the Spirit expanding within like a fountain of living water, as Jesus said, and you begin to experience a transforming presence and a sense of empowerment from God. This intense experience in prayer comes about when we get quiet inside and simply listen. It takes a real commitment to set aside the time to truly listen to God. We spend an hour each day exercising our bodies at the gym, but we will not spend half that time each day getting our soul in condition spending time in God's presence.

Jesus told a parable: A sower went forth to sow. Some of the seed fell by the wayside and the birds devoured it. Some fell on hard ground and withered

because the young plants could not put down deep roots. Some fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them. But some of the seed fell on good ground and they brought forth fruit, in some cases a hundred-fold. The seed falling on good soil, he later explained “refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Our challenge this week is to get quiet and get in the presence of God. Begin with just one little and very simple prayer. “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” You want to know the condition of the soil which is your heart? It’s simply a matter of listening. AMEN.