

Listening Behind the Words

Scriptures: Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

February 14, 2016

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

A number of you know that for the last several years I've had the great privilege of chairing a body in our annual conference called the Board of Ordained Ministry, which is the body that approves people for ordination in our denomination. And last month, our board, after a very healthy process of discernment, voted to move to recommend to the annual conference our first married LGBTQ candidate for ordination. And as you might imagine, that caused a bit of a stir in our annual conference and across the denomination. In an effort to be transparent about that process, the board and the conference crafted some statements about that that were posted on the conference website this Wednesday and will come out in the conference newspaper this coming week. That got picked up by our national United Methodist News Service, so there's been a lot of dialogue about it. And I took a few minutes this week to actually go on the United Methodist News Service website to see some of the commentary that people were writing about that decision, and as you might imagine and is often the case around this issue in our church, there was some fairly volatile dialogue on the web about that.

You had folks on the one side saying the board is apostate and on the other side other folks saying, "What about love your neighbor do you not understand?" And the back and forth gets very aggressive. And there's not a lot of listening that happens. In that venue obviously because that's hard online but even in our broader church there's not a lot of listening that happens on either side, frankly, as we dialogue about this issue.

That was a little bit discouraging to me because it feels like that bodes poorly for our upcoming General Conference in May which is when we will re-write the laws of the church but it also feels like it echoes some of the very volatile polarization that we see in a lot of the national debate in our country. We see this in the political realm very, very significantly in that it is very hard for our Congress to have healthy conversation about anything about which they are charged to write laws. It also finds its way obviously into a very heated presidential election process where voices of anger and fear dominate a lot of the conversation that we should be having as a nation.

Today we enter into the first Sunday of Lent together and Lent is a time in our church traditionally when we focus on our spiritual life with a little bit more intentionality and focus on some of the traditional spiritual disciplines of our church. And I wanted to spend some time this Lent talking about the spiritual discipline of listening. How do we go about listening to one another as individuals, as a community? How do we go about listening for the voice of God? As we normally do during Lent, we follow the lectionary texts, which are the set of readings that the church lays out for these weeks. But I'm

going to be looking particularly at themes in all of these texts that help us reflect on how we go about listening in ways that bring new life to our relationships and to our lives.

II. Desert Spaces

Lent is a time traditionally when we give up something, and the whole discipline of giving up something for Lent is to highlight the process of stripping away the things in our lives that sometimes feel so vital to us but often mask the piece that is the most important for us which is our relationship with God. Lent is a chance to sort of let go of some of the things that feel really important so that we can re-focus on what is really important. We become more aware of our need for God as we let go of some of the clutter and the busyness of our daily lives. We let go a little bit of the constant noise that we are surrounded by.

We don't have hardly any space in our life today for silence, right? We can't have quiet. We've got to have Muzak playing behind us in the stores and in the elevators. We've got a constant barrage of news that is just pummeling us all the time. We've got the constant ding of new e-mails coming in our inbox that require our immediate attention. It's very hard to have quiet space. And I will acknowledge that I'm lousy at this too. If I find myself in a quiet space, I'd very frequently find myself turning on some music to listen to, because quiet is hard for us, silence is hard for us. Because something happens there, I think, that can be a little threatening in terms of what we might hear in the quiet.

III. Jesus in the Desert

Part of my Lenten journey this year is reading from one of the classics of 20th Century spirituality which is a wonderful little book called *Letters from the Desert* written by a Roman Catholic layperson who's an Italian by the name of Carlo Carretto. Carlo Carretto was an activist in the middle of the 20th Century in Italy, particularly with the Italian youth forum, and he was very deeply engaged in a lot of the social change in his country after World War II. But he found himself feeling more and more called away from a life of activism as he got older and he writes in his wonderful book, "When I was 44 years old there occurred the most serious call of my life, the call to the contemplative life. I experienced it deeply in the depth which only faith can provide and where darkness is absolute, where human strength can no longer help. This time I had to say yes without understanding a thing." Then he -- this is in quotes because these are the words that he heard God speak to him, "Leave everything and come with me into the desert. It is not your acts and your deeds that I want. It is your prayer and your love."

And so, Carlo Carretto left his ministry in Italy and became part of a monastic community in the Sahara Desert in Algeria, and began the discipline of silence.

And I'll be reflecting at various points throughout our sermon series on some of his words, because Lent in many ways is like being in a desert. It is a place that is

carved out where we are to learn a little bit how to be silent. The stripping away of Lent in part is about stripping away of the sound in our lives. Carlo Carretto writes, "here in the desert, living in perpetual silence, one learns to distinguish its different shades," -- I like that image -- "the silence of the church, the silence of one's monastic cell, the silence at work, the silence of the soul, and God's silence."

Silence is really about how to listen differently. And we don't listen well in our culture. Even when we're in conversation with people that we love and care about, we spend most of our time not really listening to what they say but preparing what we're going to say in response. We're plotting about how to refute an argument or how to affirm something that they said or often how to turn the conversation back to something that's true about me. Has that ever happened to you? Someone says, "I've been going through this really tough period at work." And you go, "Oh, you've got nothing. Listen to my work story." What they just invited you to do was to show them that you care about them enough to hear their story, and we have a very, very hard time doing that. And if we can't listen to the people we love, is it any wonder that we have a hard time listening to the people with whom we disagree or even dislike? And if we have this hard a time with silence, is it any wonder that we have a hard time hearing the voice of God?

So, our lectionary texts for Lent always start with this story of Jesus moving to the desert. It's the time right after Jesus' baptism and he is preparing himself for what his ministry is going to be about and he takes the time to re-focus and re-center, a time to strip away all of the extraneous noise so that he can hear where God is calling him. And of course, what interestingly happens is he not only opens himself up to hear God in a different way, he opens himself up to hear other voices in a different way. And it's always struck me as interesting that Luke doesn't talk to us about what he heard from God. Luke talks to us about what he heard from Satan. And again, if it's hard to listen to the people that we love, how much harder is it to listen to the voices that stand in opposition to us? But what's interesting about this story is that Jesus listens so carefully to what Satan says to him that he not only hears Satan's question, he hears the question that's behind Satan's question. Because often when people are talking to us what they're verbalizing is really a window into something that's going on behind that, right? They may be asking us a question but that question may be voicing a place of woundedness for them or a place of celebration that may not be in the words but are behind the words. And Jesus does this with Satan very powerfully.

In this first question, Satan, of course, asks about food because Jesus has been fasting for 40 days, he is really, really hungry. What Jesus sees behind that question is the real question that Satan is pushing him on which is, who do you trust? Is your being fed a function of your work or do you trust enough in God to let God set the agenda? And Jesus speaks both to his surface question and to the question behind it, which is our trust as Christians is always rooted in the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God.

In the second question Jesus understands that the surface question which is, will you take on rulership of the world, is not the question. The question behind it is, where

does power really reside? And again, Jesus answers both the one question and the other.

In the third question, it's very interesting because in the first question, the real question was about trust. In the third question, the surface question was about trust -- do you trust God enough to throw yourself off of this temple and know that God is going to care for you? And Jesus again realizes that the real question in this case is not about trust, it's about who sets the agenda, us or God? Are we going to force God's hand or are we going to let God's will guide our actions?

And I want to suggest, dear friends, that as we engage together in this 40 days of Lent, that we bring some focus to how we go about listening. How do we listen to the people around us? Can we stop our internal talking and planning about what we're going to say and really listen to what someone says to us? Can we not be the interrupting cow and let somebody finish what they were going to say instead of assuming we already know what they're going to say?

How do we listen in community? How can we take a group of people that is deeply diverse and strongly opinionated and be in real conversation with each other? This is a process that John Wesley called holy conferencing and saw it as a means of grace, because he understood deeply that the Holy Spirit moves most powerfully when we can be in substantive dialogue with one another. This is one of the things that pleased me so much about our Board of Ordained Ministry process last month, it was because we took some time even before the candidate came before us to be guided through a very spirit-led dialogue.

The board is 54 people with enormous diversity of gender and ethnicity and theological perspective, and we allowed the spirit to guide us to a place where we all came to a conclusion together. That's a very holy process and one that we don't get to experience very often sadly, especially in the church. And I get that that's a hard process because we feel very strongly of our opinions. I will acknowledge that I know almost all the time that I am right, so that mostly what I have to do is simply persuade you how right I am so that we can move forward, right? No. See, John Wesley understood that the Holy Spirit moves when you and I can be in dialogue and I really listen to you and you really listen to me and we really listen to the spirit.

So, take a little time to do that over these next 40 days. Listen to the people around you and try a little listening in silence, because as our wonderful passage from Romans reminds us quoting Deuteronomy, "God's word is always very near to us." And what that means is we don't have to go out some place looking for what God wants us to do. We don't have to seek God's will and God's word. God's word resides deeply in us if we can be quiet enough to hear it. That means taking time for silence so that our listening is not something we simply do with one another but something that we do with God.

IV. Conclusion

A couple of weeks ago, somebody sent me a wonderful quote from the Dalai Lama that said, "When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen you may learn something new."

Amen.