

Allowing Authenticity

Scriptures: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

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1. Introduction

Roughly 40 years or so ago, I was a 9th grader and started to hear for the first time a call to ministry in my life. And it was a bit of a surprise to me because I didn't have any clergy in my family in the last several generations and I had been planning to be a marine or a microbiologist -- yes, it was a great-minds-think-alike on that -- and I had this very clear path mapped out for me. And as I started to feel this call to this very different sort of career, I didn't know what to do with that and I didn't know where to talk about it.

And about that same time I got a letter from the Sunday school teacher who had taught me in the fifth and sixth grade, her name was Barbara Farnum, and she wrote me a letter that said, "We haven't talked much in the last couple of years but I know that as young adults start to move into high school, they sometimes need another pair of ears than their parents to talk about things with and if it would be helpful, please know that I am here for you."

And what that did was start a long ongoing conversation between the two of us, mostly from my standpoint of the phone, as I would call her, and then she would write me these long letters, and she started to help me process what this call to ministry was about. She was a woman who was very deeply steeped in contemplative prayer and started to introduce me to some of the disciplines around contemplative prayer too, and in many important ways, guided me in the path that would become my life. Many years later when I was ordained, she gave me this beautiful stole which I love wearing in Lent as a reminder of her gift to me.

Lent is a time in the church year when we try to strip away some of the extraneous noise from our lives and attune ourselves to listening a little bit better to the voice of God. It's a place where we give up some of the things that clutter our lives and spend a little bit more time in the quiet reflecting. And this Lent as we journey together, we're using our lectionary texts for the scriptures. And the lectionary, as many of you know, is that set of Biblical texts that are laid out for any given Sunday of the year. But we're looking at those texts with an eye towards what do they have to teach us about the discipline of listening, how do we listen better.

And last week we spent a little time talking about how to listen carefully behind the words that someone is saying to us to listen to what they're actually meaning. Today I wanted to talk about how we create the space, the safe space for people to talk to us so that we can listen. How do we do what Barbara Farnum did for me which was invite me into a conversation that I didn't even really know that I needed to have and create the

space that was safe enough for a teenager to share some very personal and vulnerable places.

2. Listening as a Spiritual discipline

Listening is a good discipline to focus on during Lent because by its very nature, the act of listening is about stripping away. It is about setting aside some of our own ego and some of our own agenda so that somebody else's words can be center stage for just a moment. We don't do that very often and we don't do it very well, because even when we appear to be listening, most of us are spending that time plotting out what we have to say next, what our rebuttal is, what our excuse is, or bringing the conversation back to me somehow. But real listening, active listening is a process of setting aside all of that stuff and being open to hearing what someone else is saying to us.

In a very real sense, to listen to someone well is one of the most powerful ways that we have to share our love with them because we all have a deep abiding need to be heard. When we create the space for someone to share with us, we have given them a tremendous gift.

This is part of what is happening in our Genesis passage today because up until this point in the story in terms of God's interaction with Abraham, God has been doing all of the talking. God says to Abraham, "Get up, pack up your family. I'm going to take you to a new land." And Abraham goes and settles in Haran with his family for a period. And then God says again, "Pack up your family again. I'm taking you to a different place." God does all the talking, Abraham does all the acting, all the responding. But this story is the first place in the Genesis text where God essentially gives Abraham the space to respond to God's call on Abraham's life. And Abraham takes advantage of that to share with some very great authenticity where he is in this journey, and frankly, he is pretty frustrated and disappointed, because he had heard God, he thought, say very clearly, "that you've got a family coming," and he is over 90 at this point and Sarah is a year behind him and nothing has happened and, frankly, he's starting to assume that God must have had some other meaning in those words.

But God allows some space for Abraham to respond with some authenticity and Abraham just pours out his frustration and sorrow at where he is, "I don't have a family and you promised a family." And God then is able to respond to Abraham, not with anger or judgment but to reaffirm the promise that God had made and speak words that Abraham needed to hear from God. Abraham believes those, and the writer of Genesis tells us that Abraham's belief and trust in God's words were what set that relationship right again.

Creating the space for people to speak to us with authenticity is one of the greatest gifts we can give them. It is also often a great gift to us because sometimes the words that are then spoken are things that we need to hear. And again, in this process of listening, it happens on so many levels so that our listening with intentionality to the

people with whom we are talking also becomes a place where sometimes God speaks to us as well, through the voice of another. And when we put up barriers to that authenticity, we not only devalue the people who are trying to speak to us, but sometimes we cut ourselves off from the word that we need to hear. That's what Jesus is saying in this wonderful Gospel lesson where he talks about the fact that Jerusalem, which sort of symbolizes the people of Israel, have been invited into a conversation over and over again by God who sends them prophets to guide them on their way, and over and over again they reject the prophets, they kill the prophets, and won't hear the word that God is seeking to speak to them. And this wonderful image, Jesus talks about being like a hen who is trying to gather her brood under her wings for protection and comfort and the brood won't listen.

3. Sending the invitation

So, I want to talk for just a couple of minutes about how we go about creating the space for people to speak with us with authenticity. And the first thing I want to suggest is that -- and these are frankly pretty basic, straightforward suggestions, which you all know but I'm going to reiterate them again so listen carefully. The first one is that sometimes what is required really is simply an invitation, an explicit invitation that we are interested in hearing what someone wants to say. How often for example have we walked down the hall at work or been in a meeting with somebody from church and I say, "Laura, how are you doing?" And Laura says, "I'm okay." So, what did Laura just say to me? She said there's something on my heart. Now, what we normally do in that situation is say, "Oh, great. I'll see you later."

Well, what we just had an invitation to do was to create some space where some real sharing could happen so that my invitation there is to say, "Laura, it sounds like you're wrestling with something. What's going on?" I'm not picking on Laura, she's just in front of me, which is why you all sit progressively farther and farther back every Sunday! I know that. So, sometimes it's simply a matter of inviting someone to share what is on their heart and what you have done then is create some space where they understand that you are ready to listen and that what they have to share they can do in safety.

Now sometimes that's very easy. Sometimes you don't know what's on somebody's heart and it's simply an act of love to say, "Let's talk about whatever is troubling you." Sometimes actually we have a sense for what's on somebody's heart and maybe it's something we don't want to hear. But again extending an invitation even to hear something that you might not want to hear is a way of expressing love and being open to a word that God may be ready and wanting to speak to you. So, an invitation is an important part of hard conversations as well. And I love the way God does this, which has often provided me with wonderful examples for sermons in the course of my week. And I mentioned last week to you as we were starting the sermon series that the Board of Ordained Ministry of our conference, which I had the privilege of chairing, last month approved for commissioning our first married lesbian candidate and I shared with you that there had been a lot of fairly volatile conversation around that.

So, yesterday I was up at the conference center for a meeting and one of my colleagues came up to me at a break in the meeting and said, "You might be aware of this but I just thought you should know that you're being widely reviled on social media and on the Internet across the country." Well, how do you respond to that? I wasn't sure immediately. Thank you? I don't know. But what I tried to do then, as I have tried to do in many of these conversations, is open up some space to have a real conversation. So, rather than sort of getting sidelined by what he had said, I said to him, "Is there something that you would like to talk with me about regarding the board's decision? Because I'm happy to have that conversation with you."

Now, I've had a lot of those conversations this week and a lot of them are hard and sometimes unpleasant. But even in that context, what happens when we invite somebody into that conversation is to say, "I may disagree with you but I love you enough to listen to what you have to say, so that even if we end up disagreeing we have established a relationship that allows that conversation to continue." Inviting people into meaningful dialogue, inviting people to speak with authenticity is a powerful, powerful gift.

One of the other things that allows authentic conversation to happen is when the person that we're talking to also knows that the conversation that they're having with us will stay with us. So, one of the ways that we can invite again authentic speaking is when we articulate to someone what we're sharing with one another stays between the two of us. If you have a work colleague who is struggling with the difficult dynamic with your boss, they want to be sure that whatever they say doesn't get back to their boss. And so, part of our process of creating that safe space is articulating the fact that what you share with me stays with me.

That's a value that is drilled into us as clergy in seminaries throughout our seminary training so that you all know that when you talk to me or Janet or Drema or Dottie or Kate, what you say to us stays with us. That's a sacred responsibility that we have. And what that does immediately is create space where people can share painful stuff, vulnerable stuff, and know that it's going to be cared for. So, there are roles like clergy or therapists where that confidentiality is explicitly part of what our role is, but each of you can do that in a conversation, to articulate, "I know this is uncomfortable stuff but just know that this stays between the two of us." That creates the space where authentic conversation can happen.

One of the other obvious and easy tools in the toolbox in terms of inviting authentic conversation is to engage in questioning with the person that we are talking to. Ask for clarification; ask for fleshing out of a point. Because again what usually happens when someone starts sharing with us is we have a wonderful way of bringing it around back to ourselves, "You're having trouble with your boss? Let me tell you about my boss. That's a real problem. You're having trouble with your children? Let me talk to you about my children. That's a real problem." And what questioning does is keep the focus on the person you're talking to. "Tell me more about that. How did that happen?"

Those kinds of questions start to invite people to share more and more fully and people recognize immediately as you start to question them that you've been listening, you've been listening enough to know what the next chain in the dialogue is going to be about, and that you're continuing to be interested in who they are and keeping the focus on them. So, offering questions is a powerful way to invite people to share authentically who they are in a way, again, that is profoundly healing for them and can be a profound gift to us.

4. Conclusion

We have a wonderful Sunday school program here at Metropolitan, as many of you know, and we had a wonderful Sunday school program at Foundry when I was growing up. I don't honestly remember a single thing that I was taught in fifth and sixth grade Sunday school. Not a thing. What I remember however is the fifth and sixth grade Sunday school teacher who invited me into a conversation that was life changing. Part of what I would like us to work on in Lent is how do we have those conversations with people? How do we invite people into a conversation where we celebrate who they are, all of who they are, without judgment, without agenda, and in that process invite them to become all of who God is calling them to be and also all of who God is calling us to be?

Amen.