

Listening for Bias

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Scriptures: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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I. Introduction

Two weeks ago there was a front page *Post* article on Sunday that was entitled *What a divided America actually hears when Obama speaks* and it was reflecting a little bit on the President's State of the Union Address, and noting how we can hear as a country the exact same words and hear very different meanings to those words. The author of the article said, "According to experts who study polarization," -- who knew you can get an expertise in this, that's great(!) -- "According to experts who study polarization Americans don't necessarily disagree more on policy. What has changed is the level of mistrust, and even vitriol, Americans have for politicians and their fellow citizens on the other side of the political aisle. It is a suspicion that makes people question their neighbors' motives, their sincerity and their intelligence."

We are in the midst of Lent which is the season in the church when we work on stripping away some of the busyness and noise of our lives so that we can focus a little bit more carefully on how we listen to the voice of God. And all of our Lenten disciplines are about paring back so that we can focus on the things that are important. We're taking this Lent as an opportunity to reflect not only on how we go about listening to God with more carefulness, but how we go about listening to each other with a little bit more carefulness and looking at listening as a spiritual discipline. This feels particularly important to me in a season when we're electing a new president, how we listen to each other across that political divide. It also is important for us as our church, our denomination enters into its season of holy conferencing that happens every four years at General Conference when we re-write the laws of our church and again look at how we're talking to one another from very different cultural contexts.

We're using our lectionary texts which are the passages that the church has set out for each of the Sundays in this season, but we're looking at themes in those texts that pertain to listening and how we listen to one another.

A couple of weeks ago, we started off talking about how in our individual conversations we listen to some of the meaning that is happening behind the words that someone is actually speaking to us, because often the words that people are using don't actually convey what's going on with them behind those words. And we're going to broaden that conversation a little bit today as we talk about the issue of bias and how our filters of bias impact the way that we listen and the way that we talk.

II. Hearing our own bias

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus does this beautifully as he listens to the people who are around him report on what sounds like a great catastrophe in which Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea, had apparently massacred a group of Galileans in some event that was happening in the temple. Now we don't have any other historical reference to this so we don't actually know what the event might have been about. All we know is that from the text in Luke that a number of people were killed by Pilate. What we also know is that it was part of the theological cultural milieu of that day that one assumed that if something tragic happened to a person, that they must have done something that caused that and for which they are being punished.

And Jesus picks up on this very quickly in the conversation that he's having with the people around him. He very quickly detects a note of judgment in their telling of the story against the Galileans. And so, Jesus again hears the story but then hears the story behind the story and immediately challenges the people who are around him on their assumption, their theological assumption about why people suffer. He says, "Why do you think that they suffered any more than you do? Do you think it's because they or their parents sinned?" And he says, "No." Instead what this is an opportunity to do is to do some self-reflection on the places in our lives where we have strayed. And so, Jesus wonderfully takes it from this place where people are judging others to a place where he invites them to do some introspection and invites us all in that process, to reflect on the places we have all fallen short.

Now the point I think in this passage as it pertains to our conversations around listening is that each of us brings a set of filters or of biases to every conversation that we have. And I don't say that in a judgmental way at all. This is how we're hardwired. We all come from a particular cultural context and our gender and our race and our socioeconomic place and our education and our theological perspective and our cultural background all impact how we hear the way words are used. So, that what Jesus invites us to do is to bring to all of our conversations an awareness of what our own filters are and a desire to listen through the filters of the people with whom we are in dialogue. If we are going to listen carefully and be engaged in holy conferencing, as John Wesley would call it, we need to be aware of the biases that we bring to those conversations.

Let me give you just a couple of quick examples. We had a wonderful meeting yesterday afternoon down at Brighter Day with our partner's parish in Ward 8, and one of the issues that my colleague, Ernest Lyles, has great passion around is the issue of gun violence. He gets very energized and deeply desirous for us to work harder on this issue. Now what I noted yesterday which was interesting and a little bit unexpected is when someone says the word "gun violence" to me, what I immediately start to think about is Sandy Hook and Newtown, and all of those incredibly tragic places in the life of our country over the years where innocent groups of people have been massacred by folks with guns. So, I immediately start thinking about gun control issues. So when you

say to me "gun violence," I hear gun control, how do we start working on gun control issues.

What became immediately clear in the conversation with Ernest yesterday is Ernest is talking about the guy who got shot on the corner on Wednesday and the fact that his after-school program at Brighter Day has been in lockdown six times this year because of shootings in the neighborhood. So, when Ernest is talking about gun violence, where he goes is what do we do to talk about economic empowerment for a group of youth who feel that there is no hope in their lives. So, he goes immediately to talking about how do we strengthen our schools in the neighborhood, how do we work on economic development in Ward 8. All of those issues are important but what struck me in the conversation was how I expected from that topic on the agenda for the conversation to go in one direction and the conversation went in an entirely different direction because of Ernest's cultural context and my cultural context.

Similarly and out of that same conversation yesterday, there was a great deal of frustration and sadness and anger on the part of our brothers and sisters in the Brighter Day community about the decline of Ballou High School, which is their local high school in Ward 8. And many of the older folks were remembering the days not too many years ago when Ballou was known all over the Metropolitan area for its wonderful teaching of math and science and how things had declined so dramatically and how do we go about supporting what's going on at Ballou High School and again creating opportunity for those young people who see no hope.

And what struck me again was when we talk about building and strengthening our public schools, I have energy around that. I am a D.C. public school graduate myself. I've got great commitment and energy around this. However, I also became immediately aware in terms of the tone of the conversation, that I had this as a little bit more arm's length issue and it was so immediate and so raw for our colleagues in Ward 8. And part of that is because I live in a school district where the schools are not particularly good either, but I have the luxury of being able to send my children to private schools that I do like. And so, the reform of the D.C. public school system is something that I'm deeply committed to but can be a little bit more emotionally detached from. So that the energy and the anger and the frustration that I was hearing from my brothers and sisters in Brighter Day comes out of a place where they've got no other alternatives and that then colors how that conversation happens. And so, if we're listening carefully, we listen for those pieces that are the lenses through which we see these issues and folks with whom we are in dialogue see these issues.

Another small example happened this week when I was at the Board of Ordained Ministry retreat. This is a long and intense process for both the candidates and the board. Most of the candidates have been in this process for 10 years or so, so there's huge emotional investment there. And for the board, it's a 12-hour-a-day marathon of very intense theological conversation.

So, I was at lunch with a group of folks including the woman who was leading my group of looking at the candidates' theology, and we're tired, we're eating, and I, in an attempt to be lighthearted, mentioned to somebody that my friend, Lena, who was leading the group, was quite a taskmaster. Now I was watching Lena when I used that word and Lena quietly said, "That's not the term I would've chosen." And I all of a sudden had this very keen sense that when a white man uses the term "taskmaster," that's got very different connotations to an African American woman. Now I've known Lena for years, we love each other, we work through those kind of things, but that's a sort of classic example of how words that I don't even think about because of my cultural context and my upbringing have very different import for somebody from a different cultural context. And if I really want to communicate effectively with people who are different than I am in their cultural context and their theological perspective, I need to watch how those words get used.

A few months ago we touched on the issue of political correctness and how in much of our current presidential debate that term gets used in a pejorative way, that that's something that honest people, people who are authentic don't worry about. And I want to suggest, dear friends, that that is not the case, that political correctness is our way of honoring and being careful to those who are different than we are. Particularly when you happen to be in a majority in a particular context, those are words that care for those who are not in the majority, and we have got to pay attention to how we use our language. Words have weight and our words convey very profoundly what our perspective is, and we need to bring carefulness to that process.

III. Listening to the bias of others

We also, of course, need to be sensitive to listening to the biases of those with whom we are in conversation, just in the way that Jesus did with the people who were talking to him.

I mentioned in the last couple of weeks that our Board of Ordained Ministry last month made a fairly momentous decision in approving our first married LGBTQ candidate for ministry, and as the chair of the board, I have received lots of communication about that, positive and negative. I got a letter this week from a woman who was out in the Western region of our conference expressing deep concern that our board had done what it did. And by way of explaining to me in her e-mail that she was not unsympathetic to our motives, she says, "You know, I have a gay grandson and it's hard because I love him very much but I have to be clear with him that I disapprove of his gay lifestyle." Well, that's an interesting and illuminating phrase, right? Because when you talk about a gay lifestyle, you're talking about a choice that someone makes about how they're going to live. And so, what that did was give me an opportunity to contrast the idea of a lifestyle with her versus an orientation. What would this mean in terms of how you understand this issue if you started to understand that maybe your grandson didn't have an option to be gay but this is who he is? And I raised the question that a Bishop raised with us a couple of years ago which was, when did you decide that you were attracted to a man as a woman? And my guess is for most of us we never had a point where we decided who was

attractive to us, right? That's part of who we are. So, watching those language cues starts to shape how conversation can unfold if we're listening carefully.

IV. Listening for God

I want to close by just suggesting that these cultural filters that we bring to our conversations with one another also impact how we read and encounter the word of God, how we have conversation with God's eternal word as it speaks to us today. And I love this beautiful passage from Isaiah where the prophet says, "Listen carefully to me. Incline your ear and come to me and listen so that you might live. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." So, part of listening for bias is again an awareness for how our filters impact how we read and hear the word of God. It is those biases that 200 years ago allowed us to use scripture to justify slavery. It is those filters and biases that 60 years ago kept us from allowing women into leadership in our denomination. And it is those same filters that today keep our denomination from fully welcoming our LGBTQ sisters and brothers into full inclusion in the life of our church.

I read an interesting article this week by a wonderful Franciscan contemplative writer, whose name is Richard Rohr, and he's written a lot of books about prayer and he's a very profound thinker. But this interview that I read sort of veered away from contemplative prayer and started interestingly talking about bias. And the interviewer said to Father Rohr, "How can the Bible be used to address and dismantle white privilege?" Parenthetically on the table out here outside the sanctuary, there's a wonderful piece that is our denomination's statement about white privilege. That is worth taking a look at if you haven't seen it before.

Father Rohr responded that "the only way that the Bible can be helpful is" -- and these are his words -- "by being historically honest about the cultural, historical, and anthropological settings of every single Biblical story. When we do this," he says, "again and again, we will see the revolutionary message of the scripture and how counter-cultural it is to our own assumptions." And then he goes on to say, and this is sort of an interesting statement, "Frankly," he says, "it is dangerous to put the Bible in the hands of people who still worship their own group, their own country, their own denomination, or any other idolatry because they will always abuse it. The Dutch Masters painted all events in the life of Jesus inside of Holland's dress, furniture and atmosphere. Now we make Jesus into a Texas Republican or a moralistic Calvinist. Poor Jesus," he says. We need to be keenly aware about how our set of cultural lenses shape how we encounter the word of God.

V. Conclusion

The *Post* article a couple of weeks ago closed by quoting the White House political strategy director, David Simas, who says, "It is an amazing puzzle. Once we lose the ability to talk to each other, we lose the ability to reach consensus,

which is at the core of politics in Washington and in every town hall around the nation." It is also, of course, at the core of who we are as a people of faith and as a denomination called United Methodist, a denomination that was built on the invitation to have a broad tent and for people of differing theological perspectives to remain at the table together and in dialogue with one another.

So, as we continue our journey through Lent, I want to invite you again to pay close attention these weeks to how your biases are shaping how you frame the conversations that you find yourselves in, how do those cultural biases shape the words that you're hearing? By becoming aware of those can we develop an ability to more and more move into authentic conversation with one another, the kind of conversation that John Wesley believed allowed the Holy Spirit to move and to guide us as we seek to hear where God's voice is leading us as God's children?

Amen.