

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost/July 17, 2016

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The most remarkable listener I have ever met is former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell while he was the President's Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. Through a friend who was a former congressman I was able to arrange a meeting between Mitchell and Rabbi Menachem Froman, founder of the Takoa Settlement on the West Bank, and Sheikh Ghassan Manasra, Director of the Lights of Peace Society in Israel. We were ushered into a room where Mitchell and his staff joined us. Intent on listening, Mitchell focused directly on whomever was speaking. He hardly blinked. In his autobiography he wrote: "The simple gesture of maintaining eye contact and concentrating on what another person is saying is not only a source of information and learning. It is also a sign of respect." Mitchell lasted in this appointment for two years. He concluded, "The process in which I engaged as U.S. Envoy to the Middle East was largely contentious and disappointing, one quarrel after another." Mitchell may have been the only one listening.

If we meet and listen to one another we reweave the world into wholeness. We are all of one piece, and we find peace. Paul says, in Christ "all things hold together." We learn one another's' stories and develop respect. Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the last century, wrote: "In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. No human relation, especially no intimate one, is possible without mutual listening. Reproaches, reactions, defenses may be justified in terms of proportional justice. But perhaps they would prove to be unjust if there were more mutual listening. All things and all (people), so to speak, call on us with small or loud voices. They want us to listen, they want us to understand their intrinsic claims, their justice of being. They want justice from us. But we can give it to them only through the love which listens."

Listening brings us into relationship. Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. The key to spiritual growth is listening. Mary's heart is open. She is ready to learn. God also listens. In our gathering prayer that we call the collect we admit that God knows "our necessities before we ask." Before we can say anything, God has heard us. Last week Jesus taught that the way to fullness of life was to love our neighbor, and he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Today, he is saying there is another way to eternal life and that is to listen.

But it is not about just listening to anything. It matters what we listen to. We can listen to our ambition and climb over others. We can listen to our fears and hide what is most precious about ourselves. Sometimes we hold ourselves back because we are listening to our limitations. Other times we listen to power and control and wield the weaponry of death, literally or figuratively. I have said it before that ISIS or ISIL is not a religious group. They are not listening to God or Allah. The killer in Nice whom ISIS called one of its soldiers was not particularly religious. He listened to his own internal demons and ISIS's call to target citizens of countries fighting the Islamic State. He did not listen to God who "guides those who follow divine will in ways of peace," as it says in the Qur'an.

As Christians we would say that none of these things to which we may listen can hold a candle next to Christ. Paul says there are no other powers that rival Christ. "Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." All things spring from Christ and in Christ they find their common center. That's what we need to listen to; that's what brings us into relationship with one another; that's where we find justice; and that's where we encounter respect.

This voice of God for which we listen will often come from where we least expect it. It can be a still, small voice in the midst of the world's cacophony. It can be the voice of an itinerant carpenter in a primitive home. It can be the voice of a stranger who appears unexpectedly. But in every case the message is about the fullness of life. The strangers said to Abraham, "your wife Sarah shall have a son." Sarah overheard this while she remained in the tent and laughed at the absurdity of it. She was too old to be giving birth. But God

said, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord.” Sometimes we say to ourselves, “The timing isn’t right. I don’t think we can do it. I am afraid to try.” And God answers, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Just sit at Jesus’ feet and listen.

This often does not happen without some preparation. We have to be *ready* to listen. Now it may seem that preparation and distraction are the same but they are not. Abraham prepared, Martha was distracted. Martha was caught up in a frenzy of many tasks. They were consuming her. We too can become so preoccupied that there is no space or serenity to become quiet and listen. Now what Abraham does *looks* like what Martha does, but he ends up in quite a different place. Three strangers appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the entrance to his tent. One of the ways we prepare to listen is to be hospitable to the strange, the new, the other. And Abraham kicks his whole household into gear! Sarah sets about making cakes. The servants prepare a calf. Abraham sets curds and milk and water before his guests. And when all the preparation is done Abraham stands by them. He is quiet; he is prepared; he is ready to listen. Something remarkable is about to be said. We teach our children the same thing in Godly Play. We tell them they have to be ready. They are about to hear something remarkable. Sarah is about to have a baby. She is going to give life where before it seemed that no life was possible. God is about to make a way out of no way. Be ready; don’t miss it; listen. Hospitality signals our openness to the other and to listening for what they will say.

There is another way we prepare. It is not a way that any of us look for, but it happens. Suffering can be preparatory. Paul tells of the great sufferings he has undergone on behalf of the gospel. He has the recognition that his sufferings have somehow revealed to him things that might have been hidden from others. He said, “I am now (probably not while he was going through it, but now) rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake... the mystery that has been hidden... has now been revealed.” Suffering took Paul to where he could not take another step on his own and to where he could hear, to where he needed to listen to the deeper counsels of God – the fullness of life.

Listening is a way to life in all its fullness. It is sometimes rare. George Mitchell was not successful in modeling listening in the Middle East that was distracted by fear and injustice. No one could listen to what might have been remarkable to hear – respect, justice, a way out of no way. Listening can reweave our world whether on an individual or communal scale into holiness and wholeness. But it matters what we listen to. It needs to be heart-to-heart listening. God listens to our hearts and knows our needs before we ask. But we mortals need to speak our needs to one another and have them listened to. So get ready. Be hospitable, not in a way that drives us to distraction, but ends in a quiet waiting, attending upon what the other needs to say; listening with the heart. Be ready. Let even our suffering take us beyond ourselves, where we are opened up to something deep, to possibilities beyond what we previously could imagine. Then we recognize the mystery of love that had been hidden, and the fullness of life that had seemed so out of reach.

Amen.