

“Listening Skills”

Sermon Preached by the Rev. William H. Critzman

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Scripture References 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 | Mark 6:1-13

Imagine yourself a 30 year old warrior, a soldier. Imagine—in most of our cases, *remember*—what it felt like to be in a 30 year old body. Feel the agility, the muscles, the alignment of everything working exactly as it should before anything else begins taking its toll. Feel the strength of a back that has never been thrown out. Feel your knees strong and steady, and your own. Imagine the amount of sheer energy that pulses through your body every morning as you wake up and work out with your fellow soldiers, fellows all in line with the same mission. In your charge is the care of a young nation of ancient people. You are the upstart army in the land of giants, and everywhere you turn threat exists. Staying fit and agile and sharp-witted isn’t an option here, it’s a necessity. And you, you are a soldier in charge of a mighty army. Imagine yourself as this soldier, this boy leader named David, and imagine how hard your head must be. With all of your strength and success, with your youth and your vigor, imagine how close fool-hearty and courageous are in attribution. Think of how certain you were of things you knew when you were 30, and think of what the battlefield might have solidified in your thinking, fixed in your ken, and grounded in your soul. Are you prone to listening? What would it take to get you to change your mind, or alter your course?

Now take a moment to imagine yourself a different sort of 30 year old, a bookish lad well trained in rhetoric and gifted beyond compare in logic—wise well beyond your years. Imagine you’ve been out on a different sort of journey than the one a warrior might make. Imagine it more as a campaign tour—getting to know the people, hearing their stories, doing what you can to help, making promises for a better way. Just like the soldier, imagine that you too are not alone on this tour, but are surrounded by a coterie of fellow dreamers, people called to envision a better world and to not rest until it is brought into reality. You are a visionary. Your mind is functioning at its peak. You don’t forget anything. You don’t even need to take notes, or make lists. You have an uncommon grasp of the human experience—everything from emotions and sentiments to knowledge and the bigger questions of who we are, where we come from, and why we’re here.

Now, add another layer to this imagination. As surprising as it may be to some, you don’t come from a good family or from the right side of town. Imagine you’re the first person of your family to have had access to the kind of schooling you’ve had. Imagine that genetics did what genetics do when a child is born and an entirely new being emerges from what had been before. You’re not wealthy. You’re parents are day laborers—skilled and competent mind you, but without the protections of either corporate or national insurance policies. Your dad’s a carpenter. Your mom tends the home, makes the wine, and cares for you and your many brothers and sisters. Yes, it was a happy home, but you always felt a bit different—call it *wanderlust*, or drive, or ambition. Imagine yourself this 30 year old visionary called Jesus from a know nothing little town called Nazareth who had been out to see the world, and had come home from your first year out with some of your best friends from the adventure. “Mom, Dad, everyone, these are my friends and we have so much to tell you.” You’ve come home to share everything you’ve learned and to see what your family will think; to make them proud. Hometown kid done good. Do people listen to you? What do people think of you? Have you ever heard these words: “who do you think you are?” Has someone said them to you? Are they

words your own doubt says to you? Coming home, what authority do you have over anything? Why am I going to listen to you?

There are at least two important skills that must be held in tension as we learn to listen, really listen, to one another. The first is an identification with the other. Something in you that registers that something in me is both similar and of interest to something in you. There's something familiar, something shared, something of a connection that can be fostered. We share a humanity. To make the boy soldier who would be king listen, it took "all the tribes of Israel," which is to say 12, which is to say a literal army to come out and talk to him. "Look," they say, "we are your bone and your flesh," *listen to us*, you know us. The people who want to be heard appeal to their audience's similarity, they rely on empathy, and David listens. Polite and well-mannered, respectful and open, most of us can get this right most of the time.

The flip side of listening skills is what the actress Anna Deavere Smith calls "the broad jump to the other." This is the idea that the other person is *wholly other* than ourselves; that each of us have a set of experiences, attributes, limitations, proclivities, and blessings that are particular to each of us—they're unique. Each of us is unique. In this listening skill, it's the idea that I recognize that something in you is so entirely different from me that no amount of identification or similarity or straining will ever make me know firsthand just what or how you feel. You are an entirely other creation, and the only way I will ever understand who you are or what you're saying is if I first acknowledge our difference. Then, from that place of difference, that place where each of us are encouraged to be our own authority on our own lives, then we can begin to listen to each other's stories with a sense of reverie and, in Krista Tippett's description, "awe." For many of us who prize civility, this is the harder task of listening because we so quickly want to say, "yes, yes, I understand" or "I know exactly how you feel." When truly listening, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Holding in tension the contradictory ideas that we are similar enough to be common and different enough to be unique is difficult at the best of times and downright impossible in times of discord. When party lines get drawn, when fundamentalisms get brought out, when walls go up, it's hard to listen to our difference while remembering our shared humanity; it's hard too to listen to our shared humanity while also allowing for difference. Group cohesion and unity requires some sublimation of our listening skills, which is to say some silencing of the voice that we alone can hear, a voice that calls to all of us individually. Sigmund Freud writes of this in the monograph *Civilization and its Discontents*, speaking of how difficult it is to be both civil and content when there's so much aggression and anger at what's wrong around us that we cannot speak. When civility is prized over truth, we miss out on opportunities to listen, to learn, and to grow. Even more of a tragedy is that we miss out on opportunities to know each other. On the other hand, when truth is prized more than civility, revolutions occur. It's a delicate balance.

Twelve tribes of Israel come out to appeal to David to help him listen, and he does. The first attribute of listening—empathy and connection—proves successful. Jesus returns to his home town with the twelve disciples and though he speaks his truth, group cohesion and a firmness not only of "we know who we are," but "we know who *you* are too" impairs their ability to listen. With authority, Jesus returns to Nazareth. Even with the wisdom from his travels and his study and his divinity, Jesus's teachings are ignored. And not just politely ignored, but those with the power of being "the norm" take offense. "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom that has been given to him?" You can hear the jealousy in their questions. "What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" You can hear the fear of those who cling to power for power's sake trembling that their rule is a sham. "Is not this the

carpenter, the son of Mary?” You can hear the power of group identity and cohesion come crashing down—“who do you think you are? How dare you?” So tentative about their own identity are they, that they fail to listen to who Jesus really is. The harder part of listening is understanding that there is a chasm between you and me that can only be bridged if we learn to listen to one another’s difference.

In a time where the speed, spread, and reach of information is going through an innovation unparalleled since the invention of the printing press, it can be hard to know what to listen to these days. Everyone has a voice, and everyone’s voice deserves to be heard. This is the part of listening that our empathy tells us to acknowledge; that civility suggests we heed. This is also the sort of comment that can get us into trouble when we assume to know too much. Like when a white actress can blithely erase the diversity and uniqueness of people of colors’ stories joking “they’re just like us, there, now you’re all caught up.” Or when truth that we don’t like can be declared “fake.” Or when lies are attempted to be hammered into fact by sheer repetition and volume, as if history has not seen this before. This need to consume another’s identity in order to understand is what happens when empathy and a sense of oneself is unchecked by awe. It is what happens when my need to know overtakes my interest in asking. These sorts of comments grounded in sameness disavow individuality and the opportunity for true diversity. They’re what hold the locals who knew Jesus as the carpenter’s boy back from knowing him as God among them. They don’t listen to him. You don’t need me to tell you what a missed opportunity this is for them.

If, however, we allow for a sense of curiosity to guide our listening, what more might we hear? If we begin our listening each day, in each conversation, from the position of “I know who I am, and I am interested in listening to who you are,” what more might we come to know? The shared experience of being bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh is surely important. So too is the authenticity that comes not from the ego’s need to know all, but from the wiser path of being interested in all and of listening as broadly as possible. Listening to the call of God that makes us each unique. Listening to the questions of one another; listening too to the laments and longings and pains as well as the joys, knowledge, and convictions. Listening is a balancing act. Listening, like faith, is a relationship between what I don’t know, what I can know, and what I will never know. We learn these skills first in communities with whom we can easily identify. We apply them best when we then hone them working with communities that are far from what we know: when we travel; when we ask questions; when we are bold enough to speak and hear truth without fear. When we are stronger in our own listening skills, we can heal the world.

King David ruled for 40 years, and in all that time he became greater and greater for the LORD, the God of hosts was with him. Listening first to his community, he then heard the call of God who said, “it is *you*” who shall do this. What call from God can this community help you listen for today?

Jesus the Christ brought a message of authority and wisdom that those in power did not want to hear. This did not stop him from speaking it, nor did it stop the faithful from hearing it. “If anyone will not listen,” he instructs his disciples, “shake off the dust that is on your feet” and be on your way. Listening to what you alone know about you, what truth do you need others to hear or else be on your way? With Christ as our guide, are you ready to speak? With God as your ever present help, how deeply are you ready to listen? For the truths that will save the world are not shallow or weak, but are deep and mighty. They come with authority to banish all that threatens to silence. They come with a force of goodness and light, of mercy and justice, of compassion and of love. Will you listen?