

“The Art of Listening”

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²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

(Luke 9:28-36)

While there are a number of significant details in this text, any of which could support an entire sermon, I want to focus this morning on the voice from heaven. If we have to pick one element, the voice of God booming from the cloud seems to me a good one. In the short but packed statement, God says three key things, all of which serve to establish the authority of Jesus: (1) God identifies Jesus as “my Son,” (2) God affirms that Jesus is the “chosen” one, and (3) God gives an instruction that the disciples are to “listen to him.” Today I want to drill down on these words of God, and especially the active imperative **command** from God that disciples are instructed to “listen” to Jesus.

I think you all would agree that there is big difference between listening and hearing. Hearing is an involuntary reaction, something that happens when sound vibrations make it to our eardrum. It is a matter of physics and anatomy. Listening, on the other hand, is something we must actively choose to do. Listening requires more than ears, sound waves, and auditory neurons. Listening requires active attention, a curious mind, and a receptive spirit.

Here’s an example of the difference. When I was in college, I took a music appreciation course. Around the middle of the term our professor said we could get some extra credit if we went down to Charlotte to hear the symphony perform. A friend of mine and I decided to take him up on the offer, so we put on our coats and ties and drove down to Ovens Auditorium. We actually had great seats in the orchestra section – right in the middle and pretty close to the stage. As the lights went down and the conductor picked up his baton, my friend reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out his Sony Walkman. “Just in case,” he said, as he put his headphones on. [For you younger folks, this is the equivalent of putting your air pods in and streaming a Spotify playlist.] Ten minutes later, he was fast asleep. I am pretty sure that this was not what our music appreciation professor had in mind. He wanted us to do more than hear some music. He wanted us to be in the room, to soak in the event, and **listen** to the music. He hoped that we would receive the music, engage the music, and let the music interact with us... if only for an hour or so.



This distinction is so important that it is something I take time to work on with every couple that comes to me for pre-marital counseling. Together, we learn an exercise that counselors call “active listening.” In a nutshell, active listening is an act – something we can do -- that lets our partner know he or she has been heard and understood. It is very simple. One person speaks clearly and honestly about how they feel or something that is important to them. The other partner, the “active listener,” tries to be as attentive as possible to what is *actually being said*, and then restates what they heard back to the speaker. It sounds so basic, even to the point of being corny. But anyone who has been in a long term relationship knows that, when communication is strained, sometimes you have to go back to the very basics before you can move forward. Some active listening responses I have heard in my counseling sessions include:

"I hear you saying that you feel angry when I don't squeeze the toothpaste from the bottom of the tube."

"If I understand you correctly, you are saying that my practice of leaving the toilet seat up causes you frustration."

Like I said, it is simple. But, as simple as it is, this strategy can be vitally important in our relationships because the truth is that most of us are notoriously bad listeners. What we hear is what we want to hear, even if that is not what is actually being said. Or, we can hear something we do not want to hear – something that we fear -- simply because we are so guarded about a potential threat, so on the lookout for clues that something is about to go wrong, that we hear a threat approaching around every corner. Even when we are trying hard to listen, we misunderstand one another a lot, because the filters of our emotions, our hopes, our fears, and our prejudices can scramble up a message so badly that, by the time the message finally makes it from our ear and into our consciousness, we are hearing something that was never really said. And that can be a real problem, because most of the things we really need to talk about are a lot more significant than toilet seats and toothpaste tubes.

So, just think about the disciples in this situation. The text tells us that they were “weighed down with sleep.” They were tired and bleary-eyed. Plus they had been traveling with Jesus for a while now. They had heard him preach and teach and pray a lot on the road, and maybe their attention kind of clicked in and out through all of that, so his words might kind of blend together as their minds wandered. But then, all of a sudden, things started to get really weird up on the mountaintop. They start hearing two other voices, then look and see two other men standing with Jesus. Maybe they felt a little bit enlightened and a little bit confused, a little exhilarated but a little exhausted, engaged but also frightened all at the same time. Who knows what they were processing, or what they thought they heard. Whatever it was, Peter was clearly so bum-fuzzled that he defaulted to a typical male strategy for avoiding confusion ... “Hey, why don’t we build something?” He had no idea what to do or say, so his inner child piped up and said “Let’s build a fort!” The scripture is kind but pointed here. It just says that Peter didn’t really know what he was saying. But it seems that the tracks connecting his ears to his brain to his mouth were a twisted wreck, and that his train of thought had clearly derailed.

And that is when the clouds came in. If you have ever had the experience of being up on a mountain when a cloud comes upon you, then you know what this must have felt like. I did a lot of camping as a Boy Scout, and this happened to me a number of times. Visually, everything gets whitewashed, and you can only see a limited distance around you. Dull

greens and browns almost fade away, but the brighter colors – a yellow tent, a red bandana, a bright blue rain jacket – they seem highlighted against the white backdrop. But it is the sound that I really remember. The gentle whoosh of the moving air that is carrying the cloud across the mountain muffles every other sound. Then again, the voices that you can hear are clearer and closer, because the ambient background sound that can distract and disorient us has been muted. So, what may have started as confusion suddenly became clear for Peter, James and John. What they saw was Jesus standing alone. And what they heard was a voice from heaven, saying “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*”

It was as if the cloud was pulling the headphones out of their ears and grabbing their attention so that they could not and would not miss the point. God didn’t want the disciples to hear the Word made flesh. God wanted the disciples to **listen** to the Word made flesh... to be in the room with him, to soak in what was being said. God didn’t want them to miss the symphony because they were too distracted by everything else. He wanted them to receive the music of the Word, engage the music of the Word, and let the music of the Word interact with their spirits.

No less is expected of us. Even now, God doesn’t want us to just hear about Jesus, or think about Jesus, or even talk about Jesus. God wants us to start by **listening** to Jesus -- actively, intently, thoughtfully listening to Jesus. And maybe what we have to do, to make sure we are listening and hearing correctly, is to repeat back what we hear him saying.

When a weapon is drawn in vengeful anger, I remember when Jesus said to Peter, “*Put your sword back into its sheath.*”

When I hear the cries of innocent people in Ukraine, I hear Jesus saying “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*”

When I look upon purposeless death in a pointless war, I hear Jesus saying “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*”

It all begins with active listening – acknowledging that we have actually heard what Jesus has said – not the filtered, watered-down, cost-free version we would prefer to hear, but the real, unvarnished, uncompromising Word of God that we are given. Only when we acknowledge what is really being said to us -- and asked of us -- can we begin an authentic conversation with God. Only then can we begin to figure out what we can and should do with the divine words we have been given.

Regrettably, I fear those authentic conversations are rare. Many people hear, Jesus says, but few understand. He says this clearly in Matthew’s gospel: “*Seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand.’*”

The world is always throwing noise at us – clattering cacophony, distracting drumming, a wall of white noise that can easily drown out the whispers of God. But the biblical narrative and the history of the church are full of stories of those who, by force of will, discipline, and desire, have been able to take the headphones of the world off at key moments in their lives so they could listen -- truly listen – for the eternal words of heaven and earth. Unlike most, those lucky few have been able to hear the true music of the universe – the principles of faith, hope, and love that form the bedrock of creation. And not only that, they get to be in the room where that music is made... to receive the music of the Word, engage the music of the Word, and let the music of the Word well up in them like a spring that never fails.

My prayer is that we would all be so lucky to be drawn into the mystical blessing of the cloud, where all distractions fall away, and all we can see is the Son, and over the gentle glide of the moving mist, all we can hear are the words “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**