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Listening and the Cross

I love to read. When I was growing up we would go to the public library. I would check out five or six books, read them and go back for more the next week. But reading also got me into trouble. I’m sure it happened more than once, but the incident I remember involved trouble because my parents had asked me to take out the trash, and I had not. I had not because I was immersed in a book and did not hear when they asked me to help. It may have also happened when asked to set the table, or make the bed, or pick up stuff. But I don’t remember because I did not hear. I did not listen.

It’s called selective hearing. It occurs when a person only hears what is important to them.   
It may be conscious or subconscious…the brain chooses what to hear based on what a person is trying to do, what is relevant to them. It’s not surprising that we all do it. The average person hears between 20,000 and 30,000 words during a 24 hour period. We can’t pay equal attention to every word!

Seventy to eighty percent of the time the average person is engaged in some form of communication. That poses another problem. So many voices compete for attention. Besides the people we are with in person, or on zoom like today, there is an abundance of media clamoring for our attention. We walk around with our mobile phones, engaging in texting, calling, and surfing the net. We listen to music or podcasts, we follow talk shows and entertainment, we listen to political pundits. How do we choose which voices to believe or not believe? To whom do we listen?

The Church is not immune—That’s church with a capital C, the broader church of which we here are a small part. Do we listen to Franklin Graham or Shane Claiborne, Pope Francis or Rick Warren, or Drew Hart or Glen Guyton, the Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA? Even in the Church we listen to a multitude of voices, not all of which agree; I’m not saying that’s bad. We can learn from each other.

But not all voices are equally good, equally right, even in the Church. This is not a new problem. We even find it in the Bible! Hear these words from Jeremiah 23:16, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.” This is not a one-time thing. We find it over and over again in the Old Testament books of the prophets.

No, the church is not immune. Too often the Church has interpreted God’s call as an invitation to entitlement, privilege and prestige. I see that in the voices of those who claim to be Christian but elevate independence over what is good for the neighbor. I see it in a culture of entitlement that says because we are God’s people we are especially blessed-- with abundance, with safety, with lives of comfort and ease. I see it when we equate God and country and think that when we serve country we are serving God, even when what country does is corrupt and wrong. We may think we are a Christian nation, but how is the practice of genocide against the indigenous population of the Americas Christian? How is enslavement of a human being created in God’s image a Christian value? Our history is complex, a mixture of good and bad. I see a problem when we yearn for the “good old days” when church pews were full –and yet were and often continue to be--the most segregated places in society. Privilege, power, prestige, entitlement…the voices that preach those values are seductive, enticing, ---and wrong.

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily, and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) We don’t get it. We have “sanitized” the cross…we wear it as a piece of shiny jewelry. We use it as a logo on bumper stickers or as an ornament to decorate our homes. We have forgotten how offensive the cross is.

Crucifixion was an ugly, brutal affair. People in Jesus’ day knew about crosses. They saw them in their communities when Roman authorities executed criminals and rebels. The early church knew. They saw it when fellow believers were thrown into the arena with wild beasts or hung on crosses. The early Anabaptists knew. For them the cross meant being tied to a stake and burned by fire, or tied hand and foot and thrown into the river to drown. Taking up the cross was not some nice idea or simple reminder about Jesus. It put their very lives at stake. Following Jesus is not an invitation to a comfortable life, to a safe easy life. We just don’t get it!

The disciples didn’t get it either. In Luke chapter 9 verse 11 and following we find Jesus’ question to the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter replies, “The Messiah (or Chosen One) of God.” We don’t know exactly what Peter and the disciples expected of the Messiah. We think they expected the Chosen One to overthrow the Romans and set up a new independent kingdom. They expected something great, something glorious.

Instead Jesus tells them, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” He continues, telling them that his followers could expect the same fate. “Those who want to be my followers must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it…Those who are ashamed of me and my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

But the disciples didn’t understand. They didn’t get it. They didn’t want to hear about death and suffering. I think they heard the word “glory.” I think they dreamed of greatness.

In our text today we find Peter, James and John up on a mountaintop with Jesus. Jesus has gone there to pray, to prepare for what he would face in Jerusalem. The three disciples become sleepy, but they see Jesus talking to two figures, Moses and Elijah. The text says they appeared “in glory”. Jesus’ appearance also became dazzling white. And not understanding, not realizing, Peter suggests, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings—One for you, one for Moses, and One for Elijah.”

Peter wants to remain in that space of glory. He does not want to hear Jesus’ earlier words about a cross. He is not alone in that desire. Later in chapter 9, after this event, Jesus once again tells the disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears; the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” But they did not understand, they did not want to hear these words, they were afraid to ask more. That was not the direction they wanted events to go. In fact, Luke reports that an argument arose among them, “which of us is greatest.” They had dreams of glory, not of a cross.

The transfiguration story which we read this morning is a hinge. From this point on Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem and the cross. It is appropriate for us today, since this week, we too begin our journey into Lent, remembering the events that led to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

While they were still on the mountain, after Moses and Elijah had departed, after Peter’s ill-spoken words, a cloud came and overshadowed them. This reminds us of the Cloud of Presence that journeyed with the Israelites years and years, generations earlier. A voice came from the cloud and the three disciples were terrified. “This is my Son, My Chosen; listen to him!”

At Jesus’ baptism, after he had been baptized and was praying, Luke records that a voice came from heaven then, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Unlike that earlier event, here on the mountain the words are addressed, not to Jesus, but to the disciples. “This is my Son, My Chosen; listen to him!”

Although they did not understand, or even want to understand, for the disciples, also, the journey had begun toward the cross. It would take Jesus’ death and resurrection before they understood. It would take the power of God’s Spirit before they responded with boldness. And it was Jesus’ words and teachings that they remembered, and passed on to new generations of followers, followers like us, who are also called to listen to Jesus, and to take up our cross and follow.

For those of us who have grown up attending church, the stories are not new. Jesus’ words are not new. We have heard many of them since we were children. But perhaps because they are so familiar, and yet from a time and culture different than our own, we don’t really hear. Dorothy Sayers was an English author and student of classical and modern languages. I enjoy reading her mystery novels. Recently I ran across something else that she wrote, about the cross and forgiveness. Her words gave me a new lens through which to understand a little bit more about cross bearing. This is what she wrote about Jesus’ crucifixion, “They did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. They did away with him in the name of law and order, in defense of scripture and creed. Those were the values Jesus challenged, and those were the values by which he was condemned. He was not killed by vice and corruption. He was killed by piety and due process, but not before he pardoned them both.” (end quote)

How often do we teach “piety” instead of the cross? Does our religious devotion consist of being kind, doing good, singing songs about God’s glory? I’m not saying that’s bad. But piety without love for the neighbor is worthless. Piety without forgiveness benefits us nothing. Cross bearing is not about a series of good deeds. It is about loving our neighbor enough to die on their behalf. It is about compassion that is willing to get our hands dirty in order to welcome a stranger. Jesus didn’t die because he was “nice.” Jesus died because he put the needs of people ahead of the requirements of ritual. Jesus died because he loved the untouchables. Jesus died because he crossed social and religious boundaries. Jesus died because living his way threatened the power structures of the status quo. They gave him due process because from their perspective, he was guilty.

And Jesus invites us to follow, to deny ourselves and pick up our own cross, to join him in a journey that will take our whole life. Jesus invites us to become that community of healing and hope that refuses to continue cycles of violence but responds with forgiveness. Jesus invites us to seek justice where it is denied, to cross boundaries that separate us from others. Jesus invites us to love our enemies as well as our friends. Jesus also warns us that it is a narrow road, that it is not easy, that it is not safe. It is not safe but we do not walk it alone, for Jesus has gone before us and God’s Spirit goes with us.

Desmond Tutu wrote, “God places us in the world as his fellow workers—agents of transfiguration. We work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so there will be more compassion and caring, that there will be more laughter and joy, that there will be more togetherness is God’s world.”

The voice from the cloud is also a voice for us, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Listen to him. When all the competing voices clamor for our attention, listen to him. When we aren’t sure which theological voice or political voice or cultural voice is right, listen to Jesus. When we are being seduced by visions of greatness, or privilege, or power, listen to Jesus. Let Jesus be our plumb line, our center, the One who leads us to truth. Listen to him!