

“Listening to Jesus”
Matthew 17:1-9
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It is a fascinating story that appeals to all the senses. Jesus takes Peter, James and John high up on a mountain. His appearance is transfigured before them, with his face shining like the sun, and his clothes becoming dazzling white. Ancient heroes of faith, Moses and Elijah, appear, and talk with Jesus. After Peter offers to build three tents, a bright cloud envelops the whole group, overshadowing them, a voice speaks from the cloud, and the ancient heroes disappear.

It is all quite mysterious! It’s more exciting than a stage show at a rock concert! Bright lights, stage fog, extra characters appearing and disappearing, a voice speaking from a cloud – wow! No wonder this story has inspired many great works of art and no wonder we remember it so vividly. The question is - do we get it? Do we hear what the story has to say or does the message get lost in all the wonder and glitz?

The wonder and glitz are designed to help us get the message. They tell Peter, James and John that there is something very special about Jesus. The voice, meaning THE Voice, as in God, says, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” Jesus is God’s beloved son. It doesn’t get more special than this! But the point for the early disciples and us is not just about who Jesus is, but about what we should do as a result of this reality. The Voice puts it succinctly- listen to him! Listen to Jesus!

It may seem like a mundane message after all the build-up, kind of like a lot of sermons we have heard. Surely the disciples are listening to Jesus already. They have left all to follow him. Surely they are listening to him! Or are they?

What has happened before we join this story? Six days prior, Jesus has asked his disciples who others say he is and then who they say he is. Peter, as we know, makes the high confession, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus says Peter is blessed and that on him or his faith, he will build his church. But then, Jesus tries to

tell his closest followers just what kind of Messiah he is, that he will go to Jerusalem, undergo suffering and be killed, then be raised on the third day. When he does, the disciples revolt. Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” That doesn’t sound like listening to me, or Jesus, who says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!”

So, here’s the situation. The disciples believe that Jesus is a great teacher, perhaps even the Messiah, some kind of Messiah; and so, they want to listen to him, generally speaking; but when what he says doesn’t square with what they think he ought to say, they push back and argue with him. They don’t listen to him, really listen to him, as one would a wise teacher, much less a Messiah.

So, rather than argue with them on a daily basis, Jesus takes them with him up on the mountain to have a transformative experience, the kind of experience in God’s presence that they won’t have to repeat. It is an experience very much like several Moses has, encountering God on a mountain, having his face transformed. The disciples know those stories, they get the parallels, and then Moses shows up, with Elijah, to drive home the point!

Something very special is happening. God is here, speaking to them directly. They better pay attention. What does God say? That Jesus is more than an ordinary teacher to be argued with, he is God’s Son, the Beloved, they should listen to him. Oh... they must think in the moment. Oh... this is who we have been arguing with. Oh...

The message for them seems clear, as it does for us. For while we claim to be Jesus’ followers and thus seek to listen to him, our listening is just as selective as the disciples’. We listen to what we like, things like, “Blessed are those who mourn,” and, “Let the little children come to me,” and, “Come to me, all of you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” But when he says things like, “Love your enemies,” and “Forgive seventy-seven times,” and, “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me,” we start sounding like Peter.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise. We do this with other key figures in our lives. When we are young, we hear our parents say things we don’t want to hear, so we think to ourselves, “She believes that, but I sure don’t,” and go our own way and learn the hard way that our parents

were right. When we are older, we go to doctors for advice, and if we like what we hear, we follow it, but if we don't, we say to ourselves, "Salt didn't bother my father. My grandparents ate all the butter they wanted. I bet that medication will cause more harm than good." And we do the same thing with other professionals – lawyers, counselors, ministers. Why we do we ask for advice if we are not going to follow it?

I have a plaque in my office that my mother-in-law gave me years ago. It reads, "Rate Schedule: answers - \$1.00; answers which require thought - \$2.00; correct answers - \$4.00; dumb looks are still free!" I give a lot of free advice... But kidding aside, we all wonder sometimes how much professional counsel, whatever the cost, is followed.

The degree to which we are willing to consider the advice of another depends upon our perception of the advisor's expertise, and Jesus obviously ranks pretty high in the realm of advisors, but still there are times when we do not listen to him.

For listening, really listening, means more than hearing. We do have to hear what someone is saying to listen to them, but we also have to pay attention to the words that are spoken and try to grasp their meaning, not let our attention wander. When I was in high school, my mother thought my father had a hearing problem. He had been in military service and then he was in his factories that had loud machinery. So, he had his hearing tested. The doctor said his hearing was fine. His problem was that he did not listen, "like a lot of men," my mother added.

To listen, we not only have to hear what is said, we have to pay attention and try to understand. But listening, really listening, in the way the Voice intends in the reading from Matthew 17, involves even more than this. It means acting upon what we hear and understand, following the advice we are given, obeying Jesus' teachings.

In her book *Seeking God*, a contemporary exploration of the Rule of St. Benedict, Esther de Waal includes a chapter on listening as a spiritual discipline in which she says the Latin word which means "to listen," *audire*, shares a root with the Latin word which means "to obey," *oboedire*. Thus, listening and obeying are linked etymologically and existentially. To listen to Jesus, we must obey his commands, follow his teachings, which we do sometimes, but not always.

So, how do we grow in this realm? How do we listen, really listen, to Jesus, not just when it suits us and we like what he says, but when it doesn't and we don't? We begin by hearing what he has to say accurately and in context. This means interpreting, not interpreting away what we don't want to hear, but making sure we hear what he says.

In the way of an extreme example, a radio e-vangelist, as he is called, in the play *East of Nineveh*, reveals just how far off-base an interpretation can be. This uninformed young zealot insists it has been revealed to him by God what the sea-pulture in Mark 15:46 (KJV) is. It is a great white bird that hovers over Jesus at death, like an eagle. But, as we know, it is a sepulchre, not a sea-pulture; a burial place, not a bird!

In the way of a real-life example, a member in another setting asked me what the writer of Revelation was referring to when he said, "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 22:19)." I said he was referring to the book of Revelation. "No," said the man, "He was referring to the King James translation of the Bible." Really? Now that would be a prophecy, a reference to a translation compiled over 1,500 years later of a collection of books not yet agreed upon! Amazing?

Some interpretations are better than others, but we have to interpret, because the goal is to hear what Jesus is saying accurately, to understand. We may get the gist of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), but we can't fully appreciate what Jesus is saying until we understand how hated Samaritans are in the first century. We might gather that Jesus saying the poor, crippled, lame and blind should be invited to feasts and will be invited to the great feast of eternity (Luke 14:12-24) might be something new for established religious leaders in his day, but we can't really get what he is saying until we realize that these groups are explicitly excluded from the sacred community in this time because they are viewed to be suffering as a result of their sin.

If we want to listen to Jesus better, really listen to him, actually follow his teachings, we begin by trying to hear accurately what he says. That requires interpretation of both the context of his words and the realities of our time so as to connect the two.

Once we have done this, we need to be honest about how we feel about any teaching. We have a tendency to approach any biblical text, especially teachings of Jesus, with a kind of reverence that gets in the way of honesty. Reverence is a good thing, but pretending we agree with and thus plan to follow a teaching when we do not is not helpful. If a text strikes us the wrong way, God knows this. We might as well be honest. Our honesty will help us respond faithfully to the text.

Old Testament professor and beloved FBC member Elmo Scoggin modelled this sort of honesty throughout his life, but in one specific gathering of our members some years ago, he really modelled it. He told the group that the Bible is not only not a history book, it does in fact have some lies in it. His words, not mine! For example, in the book of Joshua, God tells the Hebrew people to kill everyone in the land they enter. That is simply not so, Elmo said, God didn't tell them to do that!

Now, Elmo was not a master of subtlety. One might have said that we shouldn't take this text literally. It is a story told to people living in exile, people whose nation never has been a great political power. It bolsters their self-esteem to imagine a time when they were whoopin' up on everyone! But Elmo didn't put it this way. He was much more direct, and the truth is when you're trying to get someone unstuck from a false construct, subtlety may not work as well as a blunt instrument. Saying the Bible tells lies sounds troubling, but did God tell one group of people to kill everyone else? What kind of God would this be?

No matter how we feel about Elmo's take on Joshua, and no matter what language we might use, Elmo's honesty is what we need. If we read something objectionable, like Jesus' teaching on divorce, or hear a teaching we have no intent of following, like Jesus' word to the Rich Young Ruler to sell all he has and give to the poor, what good does it do to pretend we have embraced Jesus' teachings? Who are we fooling?

It is more helpful to say, "That doesn't sound like Jesus. Could we be missing something?" or, "That isn't possible in my life. How could I do that?" This doesn't mean we dismiss the teaching. We may need to understand the context better or we may need to work through our feelings and embrace a difficult word we need to hear. But even when the latter is the case, we are more likely to get there if we are honest.

Which brings us to one last thing we need to do if we are going to listen to Jesus – be willing to do things we don't feel like doing. Once we have done our best to hear what Jesus is saying and been honest about how we feel about it, all that remains is following his teaching. It is not always easy. His desire for us brings fulfillment, there is no better place to be than in his will, but what he asks can be challenging.

There are biblical truths we struggle to understand, including some teachings of Jesus, but more often our challenge is acting on what we do understand. There are times when we just don't know what to do, but more often the challenge is doing what we know we need to.

We don't want to forgive the relative or co-worker, but we know we need to. We don't want to give up the habit or attitude that diminishes our life, but we know Jesus would have us to. We don't want to stretch ourselves with a new spiritual discipline or area of service, but we know our lives will be enriched if we do. The question is – are we willing to do the right thing when we don't feel like doing it?

A deacon in another setting resisted a new care model. He was a bank executive who didn't feel like his gifts were in caring for people, but he knew the church needed caregivers. So, he tentatively agreed to visit people in the hospital and over time became a wonderful caregiver. This is not to say all deacons should make hospital visits, but all of us should listen when Christ calls, even if the calling does not appeal to us.

In a way, we need to channel our inner German Shepherd. There are times in obedience work when a dog doesn't want to sit or hold a stay. And sometimes the dog doesn't follow the command. This is why we call it obedience training. Dog and handler need to be trained. But over time, with work, it is possible to shape behavior and have the dog do what is asked consistently when she wants to and when he does not.

Christian life is like this. It is a kind of obedience training we do to become more consistent in following Jesus. The good news is we can trust that whatever he asks of us is good. In John 10, Jesus says he is the good shepherd and his sheep listen to his voice. We listen because we recognize his voice when we hear it, we know he wants the best for us, we trust him with our lives. And so, after all the kicking and screaming, we do what he calls us to do. That's what it means to listen to Jesus.