

**“The Priority of Listening”**  
**Luke 10:38-42**  
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I will never forget the first sermon I preached on the brief story we have read today from Luke 10. It wasn't a bad sermon. In fact, I felt rather good about it during the delivery. But after the sermon, I discovered that I had offended someone. One of our Marthas at the church I served at the time, that is to say, one of our good folks who did a great deal of work at the church while probably bearing a similar load at home, felt singled out and put down.

I tried to let her know that this was not my intention. I also pointed out that it was Jesus, not Chris, who had told Martha that she was worried and distracted by many things while Mary was doing the one needful thing in listening to him, but this only added fuel to the fire. In my experience, it rarely does much good to try to hide behind Jesus. In any event, she got over it in time, and I was sobered by the experience, but apparently not sobered enough to have learned my lesson.

Nine years ago from this pulpit I preached again on this text and again thought I had preached well while trying to acknowledge more directly the problematic overtones of Jesus' words to Martha. But yet again I stepped on toes, or to be more precise, the story pushed all sorts of buttons. How could I have known that Alice and Lynn Marshbanks are actually Mary Alice and Martha Lynn, Mary and Martha, with their own sisterly history?

But that's the way some stories work, they push all sorts of buttons, which begs a question – why would I preach again on this story? Well, the options are no picnic. The lectionary readings today include the words of judgment for economic injustice found in Amos which when I preached on them before led someone here to conclude that I favor the redistribution of wealth; the high Christology of Colossians 1 which makes for a fascinating Bible Study but guaranteed snoring in the sanctuary; and the words of Psalm 15 with which we

began worship, which ask who is welcome in God's presence and then reply – those who walk blamelessly - in other words, none of us!

Given the options, the passage from Luke seems tame, but this is not the only reason to preach from it. If we can get past the sibling rivalry and apparent favoritism of one personality type, not take Jesus' words to Martha personally, there is an important word about the priority of listening. There is no need to compare the value of listening to the value of serving. In the previous story we considered last week which includes the Parable of The Good Samaritan, Jesus affirms service as a virtue for all who follow him. Active service and quiet listening both form us as disciples of Jesus and allow us to express our faith. But like service, listening is a priority for all who follow Jesus.

It is a message we find throughout the gospels. Again and again we are told to listen to Jesus. When Jesus tells the parable of the sower, he begins by saying, "Listen (Mark 4:3)!" and concludes with the invitation, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen (Mark 4:9)!" On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Voice from the cloud says to Peter, James and John, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35)." And in today's reading, Jesus praises Mary because she has done something important – she has listened to him. The text actually says she sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him. It is the posture of a student being taught by a rabbi, which is to say that Jesus recognizes her as a worthy follower, thus resolving any arguments about the role of women in the church. For Jesus they are full partners in faith.

But the basic calling is to listen to Jesus, which seems almost too obvious to say. I remember reading a parody of the bad sermon written, I think, by C. S. Lewis' mother. It is a sermon based on the text, "Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard, to give the poor dog a bone; but when she got there the cupboard was bare, and so the poor dog had none." The sermon goes on and on, elucidating the obvious, telling us how she goes to the cupboard, what she finds there and thus what the dog gets. But it doesn't say anything other than what the rhyme itself says. Some sermons are like that... some messages are so obvious they seem to be a waste of time. Listen to Jesus - we have to be told this?

Well, the first disciples do. That's why God tells them on the Mount of Transfiguration to listen. They have been following Jesus, or so it seems, but they haven't been listening to him. They have been arguing with him every time he says something they don't want to hear. And if we are honest, we will acknowledge that we have to be told too. We have been following Jesus, but for many different reasons we too struggle to listen to him, to really listen to him.

Part of our challenge lies in the frantic pace of our culture. We all struggle with the White Rabbit Syndrome, hurrying from one activity to the next, saying, "I'm late, I'm late, I'm late," never being present where we are. We keep our devices nearby and thus are constantly being bombarded by messages, a large percentage of which are now some kind of scam to separate us from our money. No matter what we may think of Jesus' words to Martha, we are certainly distracted by many things, so much so that we don't listen very well to each other, much less God.

We've all seen families out to dinner where every family member is texting or emailing someone; most of us have been that family at some point... We are easily distracted even in church... How in the world do people like us learn to listen for the voice of Christ? We need to hear, we want to hear, but we are so unaccustomed to listening.

But it's not just that we are distracted; it's that we value busyness and activity over the discipline of listening, even in the church. We measure our worth by how much we do and we assess the effectiveness of church life by how busy we are. A colleague of the founding pastor at the church I served in Winston-Salem once called him and said, "Jack, 'I've just read your newsletter and I am exhausted just from reading about all of the activity.'" We get that, but is this a word of affirmation or a word of critique?" Too often we equate busyness with godliness. Being involved in service is critical to our calling, but so is discerning precisely how and where to serve and that requires taking time to listen.

In the early days of CBF we were convinced that what Baptists wanted most was to have a bunch of missionaries out there in the world representing us... and Christ, of course. We weren't sure exactly what we wanted them to do – I mean, there are clear Gospel mandates but

there are many of them, there are many needs and there are many churches and denominations – we just knew we needed them... out there... So, we sent them, lots of them, hurriedly, and we paid a price, many of them paid a price, because we didn't take enough time to listen, to discern what God most needed us to do.

Listening is a critical task for individuals, churches and denominations. Busyness is fine, but only if we've taken the time to get clear about how God would have us to be busy.

So, one implication of this story is that we need to develop habits of faith, spiritual discipline, to help us learn to listen. Slowing down will help, but not by itself. We need to develop our listening skills so that we can pay attention when we are quiet. Such discipline can vary. Some people hear the voice of Christ while meditating and praying quietly in a room, perhaps reading scripture and some brief reflection on it. Others hear the voice of Christ while taking a walk, going for a run, riding a bicycle or going for a swim. We can even hear the voice of Christ in the midst of service, in the busyness of life, in the chaos all around us, but only if we have taken time to learn how to listen.

And there is the key – taken time... we have to take or make time for faith. We may think we don't have time for prayer, but the truth is we can't afford not to make time for it. Wayne Oates was asked how much time he set aside for private devotions each day. Dr. Oates was a pioneer of pastoral care. He taught at Southern Seminary and at the University of Louisville's Medical School in addition to seeing clients. Seemingly he worked all the time. He couldn't possibly spend much time in prayer. But when he answered the question, people were shocked. "Two hours a day," was his answer. "How can you find that much time?" the questioner asked. "How can I not?" he replied.

In the end, it is up to us. We make time for what we value most. If we really want to hear the voice of the God who was in Christ, we will make time to learn how to listen and then to listen.

But there is another part of our challenge, perhaps an even greater part. In her book *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, Esther de Waal notes that the word "obedience" is derived from the Latin *oboedire*

which shares its roots with the Latin *audire* from which we get the word “hear” (p. 43). So, there is a connection between hearing and obeying. Any parent knows this. “Did you hear me, young man?” we say, “Are you listening, young lady?” What we mean is not just, “Did you hear my words?” but, “Do what I have told you to do!”

Herein lies the greatest challenge of listening to Jesus. Yes, we first have to hear his voice, but then we have to do what he calls us to do. For various reasons this is not always easy.

Many of the basic callings of our faith are demanding – to forgive those who hurt us, love our enemies, turn the other cheek, sell all we have or at least share willingly with all in need, welcome the stranger in our land. We know these are the teachings of Jesus. There is no dispute about that. But how many of us consistently follow these teachings? How many of us walk blamelessly and do what is right in these ways?

But many of the specific things Christ would tell us are difficult to hear too. We may be asked to give up something that is getting in the way of our own wellbeing or the wellbeing of others, but we are so attached to whatever it is that we find one excuse after another not to do so. We may be asked to do something that might help others or center our lives, but we are gifted at rationalization, at presenting arguments for why we just can’t do that. Quite often the challenge is not discerning what Christ would have us to do, but doing what we know is right.

In his book *Lake Wobegon Days* Garrison Keillor puts it this way.

‘Don’t you know it’s wrong to steal?’ he said. Of course, I knew. In the Bible, people who innovated tended to get smote, and that at a time when God smote hard: when He smited you stayed smitten, smiting was no slap on the wrist. Mrs. Tollerud illustrated this in Sunday School with a flannelgraph: a cloth-covered board on which she placed cloth figures and moved them around. The liberals got kicked out of Paradise, they got flooded upon, and Pharaoh, though decent in some ways, when he didn’t obey God, God made a mess of Egypt, dumping locusts, frogs, blood, lice, hail, and flies on them and then turning day to night. She took down the figure of Pharaoh the ruler and put up the figure of

Pharaoh with his hands over his face. It made us think twice about striking out in new directions. But knowing right from wrong is the easy part. Knowing is not the problem (p. 170).

Indeed, knowing right from wrong is not the problem. Doing right is, and listening, really listening to Jesus, requires a willingness to do.

This too may sound too obvious to say, but sometimes we struggle with the obvious. The psalmist says that those who speak the truth from their heart, those who do not slander with their tongue, are welcome in the presence of God, but many Christians have developed a tolerance for vicious words and outright lying. Amos proclaims judgment on those who trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor, those who exploit the vulnerable in the marketplace and the court system, but while many of us reach out in compassion to our neighbor, many believers still think seventeenth-century English politician Algernon Sidney's adage about God helping those who help themselves is in the Bible. The Apostle Paul writes about a cosmic Christ who unites all people of all races and nations into one body, but we are experiencing a rise in racism and xenophobia in this nation, no matter who we think is to blame, and many Christians are part of this movement or unwilling to denounce it.

Sometimes we struggle with the obvious. We will never follow Jesus perfectly, even Mary has her struggles, but if we are serious about following him, we listen for his voice the best we can and try to follow his calling even when it is difficult, even when it requires us to change.

I think of a layperson in my previous church who spoke up at a heated conference in the 1960's when some wanted to fire the whole staff because the youth had been allowed to swim with African-American youth. He acknowledged feelings about race that others shared but then said he didn't think these feelings were pleasing to his Lord, and he pleaded with everyone to pray for the church's leaders and to discern together what Jesus wanted them to do.

He changed the debate and the future of that church and he did so because he listened to the voice of Jesus that had been stirring in his heart for some time. Who knows what might be at stake in our willingness to listen to Jesus today?