

“Listen to Him”

Exodus 34: 29 – 35                      Luke 9: 28 – 36

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Peter Recalls: A Dramatic Monologue

(This monologue of Peter was prepared by Phil Porter, Minister of Liturgical Arts at First Congregational Church of Berkeley, California. He is an artist, theologian, performer, and writer who has been creating art in churches for over twenty-five years.)

So, off we went up the mountain. At least from the bottom it looked like a mountain. You might have said, “Oh, that’s just a little hill.” Hmm. Isn’t that often the case? Anyway, it was just Jesus and me and James and John. Kind of nice to get away from the rest of that crowd for a bit.

I wasn’t sure where we were going, exactly, or why. It didn’t look like anyone had a picnic basket. Jesus sometimes went away to pray. Perhaps that was what he had in mind.

So up we went, step after step. Sometimes the path was clear and smooth and not all that steep, but every once in a while, rocks would crop up and we would have to clamber over them. Jesus set a pretty brisk pace and didn’t seem to be daunted by anything that blocked the path.

When we reached the top, he didn’t seem to be breathing heavily, but James and John and I had to lean against a tree for a bit to catch up with ourselves.

After we had admired the view, Jesus sat down as though he was going to pray. We knew to leave him alone when he did this—even though I had hoped to get a few questions answered while I had him pretty much to myself. Sometimes, I must admit, I napped while he prayed, but for some reason I decided just to be with him. He was always giving so much to others. The least I could do was to offer my quiet companionship while he prayed. Let me tell you what happened next!

As I sat there and watched, Jesus seemed to be filled with light. It was like he was glowing from the inside out! His robes were all white rather than their normal dusty brown. I had never seen anything like it. But that’s not the end of the story. All of a sudden there he was, standing between Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah! Standing there talking! Right in front of us! So I’m running around saying, “We’ve got to build some shrines for these guys. Right now! Right here on the spot! Before anything disappears on us!” But then we heard this voice: “This is my Child, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Just as I had feared, the moment passed. Moses and Elijah disappeared and Jesus stopped glowing. We were frightened and amazed and awestruck and everything all at once. We were as breathless as when we walked up the mountain.

And then, and then! Jesus told us not to say anything about what had happened. Yeah, right! You’ve all heard this story before, so someone must have spilled the beans. It was certainly a day I’ll never forget.

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So, what is it that Peter remembers most clearly? The miracle? The quality of the Light? The visitation from Moses and Elijah? The affirmation of Jesus as Son of God?

We might have been impressed in the same ways if we had been there. But I wonder if we, too, would have missed the implications of the command. ... “What command?” You ask.

“Listen to him!” That is the command.

What does it mean to listen to him? What might Jesus say that we need to take in? And, what will it mean for our lives if we truly listen to his message and take it in all the way?

The superficial understanding of listening is just doing what the other person says. But, let me remind you that there is a connection between obedience and listening. It is not possible to listen deeply and not have our response to life be changed in some unpredictable way by what we hear. That is to say that the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain leads directly to our personal transfiguration. It is not enough to say “Wow” along with Peter. It is not enough to build an institution to house “the miracle”. It is not enough to stay on the mountaintop with your eyes blinded by the light.

True listening always results in action. And if you are not motivated to action, then perhaps you haven’t really heard the gospel. Jesus gave many gospel (or good news) directives to his followers, and by extension, to us. From the beginning, he established his identity as the one who delivers the message of liberation to the poor and disenfranchised. Then he told us to love one another as he has loved us. Finally, he told us to take the message to others. The metaphor for Christian service that Jesus gave to Peter has nothing to do with getting members for a Christian organization. Nor does it have anything to do with threatening people to get onto the correct moral path.

It only has to do with feeding and tending. “Do you love me?” Jesus asks Peter three times. If so, then respond to what people really need. Feed them, liberate them, open their eyes, heal their deepest wounds.

The United Church of Christ proclaims over and over again that God is Still Speaking. Once we make that proclamation then we must also ask if we are listening to the gospel message in its twenty-first century manifestation.

God tells us where to find “the sheep”. If we take that term in context, then we know that the sheep are all those who are in need – all who are left aside by the so-called values of the culture. In our history, our church has championed the cause of those who were persecuted for their religion, or their gender, or the color of their skin, of the quality of their spoken accent, or the size of their paycheck, and now for their sexual orientation.

So, where are the disenfranchised in Elmira? Where are those who are left behind by society? Where are those who need to hear God’s message of love, but maybe do not even know that such a message can come out of a Christian church?

We must listen well to discover the answers to such questions.

We must also remember that listening is not just a way to find out what God wants us to do, or even just a way to open ourselves up to the process of transformation. Listening is also about relationship. So many times couples, for example, those who come into my office for marriage counseling, identify improving their communication as one of their objectives. When I ask them what they think will help, they typically tell me that they want to be able to make their own individual points more clearly. They think that if they can just become more articulate, then their point will get across better.

While I acknowledge that it is painful not to be understood, I disagree with their remedy. I encourage them to develop their healthy curiosity so they can create a space in themselves to receive what the other person is saying. In other words, relationship can improve only when there first is an improvement in their ability to listen to each other. Many so-called relationships founder because there is lots of telling, but not enough listening going on.

Let me say, briefly that the same principle applies in the realms of business, politics, and church. Human issues are always complex and usually ambiguous. That is to say that there is not one right answer. Different approaches to human issues affect the people involved differently. So without respectful listening, we can never possess enough understanding to make decisions we are doomed to oversimplification and unnecessary division. We need to hear from a variety of perspectives in order to understand the issues thoroughly enough. It is not useful for us to succumb to the temptation of judging others on the basis of the positions they take on issues. Let me explain what I mean by that.

It is important that we learn to distinguish real questions from judgments that are disguised as questions. “How can you possibly think that way?” is not really a question. It is not a serious request for information. It is actually a judgmental statement that translates like this: There can’t possibly be any legitimate reason for you to have come to that stupid conclusion!

A real question might be: “How did you come to see things that way? I’m interested to hear about that. A question is not really a question unless you have created room in yourself to hear the answer. Real questions asked and answered honestly tend to deepen relationships. Judgments tend to create barriers between people and groups.

When on the mountain the disciples receive the command to listen to Jesus, they are being invited into a much more intimate relationship, not only with Jesus, but by extension, with God. Jesus did not come to straighten the world out by spreading moral platitudes. He came to invite people into deeper relationship with God. Whenever that happens, moral development will necessarily follow.

We can learn to listen better as a church, too. We need to listen to one another. And we also need to listen to the people of the wider community so we can understand the needs and resources that are found there and so we can develop healthy relationships beyond our own comfortable and predictable lives. In this way, our relationship with God can deepen as we grow spiritually. I pray that we will find the courage to listen carefully today and each day to come.