

The Sacred Art of Listening

Psalms 39:1-9 James 1:19-21

Our next reading is from the book of James, which reads not so much like an epistle but more like a collection of mini-exhortations on several topics.

Sometimes James sounds like the book of Proverbs, sometimes like one of the prophets; sometimes he sounds like Jesus in the sermon on the mount (and James quotes from Jesus' teaching almost word for word in a couple places), and sometimes James sounds like a salty old sports coach who might cuss you out, but who you know, at heart, wants you to succeed.

Our text from James this morning is short and to the point. Small sentences with large impact. About the sacred art of listening.

James 1:19-21

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

This is the word of the Lord!

Years ago I had the privilege of knowing a man named Addison (Add) Sewell, who was a member of a church I served for a decade or so. Add was co-founder of the ministry to students called Young Life, along with Jim Rayburn. Jim Rayburn and Add were kind of like Simon and Garfunkel. Jim Rayburn was the

creative genius behind Young Life, the outgoing personality whose “voice” everyone knew, and Add was the quiet but beautiful harmonizer of Young Life, the kind and loving heart of the operation.

Add was a remarkable man in many ways, but most remarkable to me was how others somehow sensed that he was a safe person to talk to and spill their guts to. He oozed acceptance and kindness. Once in a while he and I would go out to lunch, and one day we went to Subway, and I watched as he simply asked the young woman behind the counter who was taking his order: “How’s your day going?” And off she went to describe everything that was going on in her life at the moment. And even after he got his sandwich and paid for it, she kept on going, telling him that she just got in a fight with her mom, and she had a roommate wasn’t paying her half of the rent on time, her coworkers weren’t pulling their weight, and she was feeling like everything was her responsibility, and so on. She was feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. And afterward, she said to him, “I feel so much better. Thanks for all your help.” He just smiled and said, “You’re welcome.” He said, I didn’t offer anything except my ears. All I did was listen.

When we were eating our lunch, he said that he had come to the conclusion that most people are simply dying to be listened to.

And after talking about it together, Add and I agreed that listening is a form of evangelism, if not *the new* evangelism that God's people need to be equipped for. We could call it evangelism with our ears (which actually begins in our hearts, as we make space for others in here). Because people experience the love of God by being heard, and by being cared for through listening. Evangelism with our ears. We need to be prepared to truly hear people, not to find new ways to explain more things.

Yes, we also need to be prepared to share our journey, and how Jesus has impacted our life, but that should come forth only when it is needed or asked for. We let that follow, and we let listening lead.

People are being wounded by wordiness these days. And unfortunately, it's sometimes *Christians'* wordiness that is causing the harm. We need to show the humility (meekness, as James puts it) of being people who are skilled at listening. The sacred art of listening.

As the old saying goes, God gave us one mouth, and two ears—so, let's use them in proportion!

Before we reflect on the art of listening, a note about anger, since James mentions it. As it apparently was when James wrote this, anger seems a relevant topic right now, as it's simmering for a lot of people!

One of the things to note is that James doesn't tell us never to be angry. Neither does Jesus, or the apostle Paul when they talk about anger. What they all say is for us to *tame* our anger. Don't let it lead. Slow it down, and don't let it be our first response, or let our first reaction to someone come from a place of anger. As they say in the recovery movement, "Never obey your first thought." Because, often, our first thought isn't charitable. And sometimes that means we shouldn't obey our first *emotion* either. Especially if it's anger. James says, slow it down. Jesus teaches the same thing. Take a beat, and reflect on yourself first. Anger doesn't produce right relationship, James says. That's a good way to define righteousness: right relationship. And right relationship is what God desires, as we are called to be healers and peacemakers in the world where there is pain and discord.

The Bible actually affirms that anger is a legitimate emotion. Anger is an honest feeling and there *is* a place for it, once we have slowed ourselves down, tamed it, and channeled it productively so it isn't *dictating* our words and actions. In another words, don't let anger lead. Let listening lead, James says.

Lillie Stoute, an arts therapist (uses creative art to help people work through trauma and emotional challenges) said this, about her relationship with anger: "My anger is precious. It is one of the things that helps me get up in the

morning and face the world as a black woman. It makes me get up and fight for justice. Anger doesn't have to be negative. Anger is one of those things that makes people get out and vote, protest against war, fight for rights, and get unfair decisions overturned." That's really good!

Along those lines, I look at anger this way: anger is like the hot electricity that comes to your house from the power lines along your street. Before this high voltage electricity enters your house, it goes through these barrel-shaped objects called transformers, to change the voltage and give you the right kind, and the right amount, of electricity. Without the transformers that hot electricity would torch your house. Transformers make electricity useful, and safe.

Same with anger. It's good, but it needs to be transformed so it becomes useful, and safe for everyone. So no one is torched by it! Including us. Each of us can figure out what our own transformer may be: taking deep breaths, meditation and prayer, creating art, taking a walk; or taking time to think of what positive action I can take with the energy I have. And so forth. Or all of the above!

If you are angry about the decisions being made by our federal leadership right now, like I've been, then let's channel that energy into positive action that contributes to needed change, peacemaking, and working for the common good.

And one of the ways we can be peacemakers is by becoming good listeners to others. I almost titled this sermon “Peacemaking through listening.” Or “Healing through listening.” Sacred listening can do both.

James says: Be quick to listen. Let that be a first response. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (from his book *Life Together*): “The first service that one owes to others... consists of listening to them. Just as love of God begins with listening to God’s Word, so the beginning of love for [others] is learning to listen to them.”

This is not to say that there isn’t a time to speak. There is, as we hear in that famous Eccl. 3 passage, which says there is “a time to speak, and a time to keep silence.” It’s just that we chatty Americans tend to live on the “time to speak” side of the ledger and we less often visit the “time to be silent” side, which is so often needed.

Listening is an art. Perhaps even a lost art. I look at it as a *sacred* art. Because listening to another creates sacred space for *God* to speak, and for God to tend to the heart and soul of another through our hospitality of heart. And ear.

And just like we need all forms of art today—the visual arts, the performing arts, poetry, and a return to contemplation and reflection on beauty and all that—we need the art of listening. Not only in face-to-face conversations and encounters, but also in social media. But that’s another topic, because I’m not

sure that what is put forth on social media counts as conversation. This morning we're talking about our day-to-day interactions with neighbors, coworkers, acquaintances, and Subway sandwich makers.

Let's talk about the art of listening. Like all art, it begins in here (heart), and then results in some steps:

1. We just don't talk. Keep our mouths closed. We acknowledge the "time to keep silent." This is what James encourages when he says "be slow to speak." Not talking is a good first step, as we attempt to silence our inner chatter and our need to get our point across, whether we're correcting somebody we think is wrong, or whether we are trying to fill uncomfortable silence, or if, with good intentions, we are attempting to impart wisdom to someone. Often times, in expressing care, it's more important that we don't say anything; that we let our caring presence become the language of compassion and wisdom. And trust that people can, and often will, come to their own conclusions or resolutions about things, with God's help.

As part of learning to not reflexively talk, we need to learn to be comfortable with silence. And that begins by attempting to silence our own inner chatter and the anxiety that may surface in us during silent moments, so we can be intently aware, and present to another.

In a pamphlet for Chinese immigrants, to help immigrants understand American culture, it says (in part): “The Chinese are more likely to accept or even appreciate silent periods in conversation. American custom is not to allow long silence during conversation. Silence makes many Americans nervous.” It’s interesting to hear what other cultures see and understand about our culture.

It’s true; we are a wordy society. And we need sacred silence, and sacred listening, to make space for God to speak and bless.

This is one of the reasons we have silence in worship by the way; to create space to listen for the still small voice of God within—the Word that James talks about, implanted in us—and listen for the God who is with us always, and longs to communicate with us. Who says to us in Psalm 46: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Now, sometimes as we’re listening to someone, silence can be interpreted as judgment, so it does help to ask a well-timed and thoughtful question, or give a well-timed mirroring response, when we mirror back to people what we hear them saying, so they know we are tracking with them, with compassion. Good questions and mirroring responses can help draw people out, and that is needed too, in between moments of silence.

Yet, listening begins by... keeping our mouths shut!

2. When we listen, we listen for understanding. We listen for understanding.

Not for waiting until someone stops talking so we can then jump in with what **we** want to say. Sacred listening, listening with love, requires having no agenda, and reaching out to others with attention and even affection.

Reaching out to others with our heart, *as well as* our mind to try to understand, not just a person's words, but what lies beneath the words.

Maybe instead of saying we have no agenda when we listen, we can say that the other person *becomes* our agenda.

Stephen Covey (of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* fame): "Most of our training and education is in debate and verbal forms of persuasion. We are not trained to listen. We often listen to another person only long enough to figure out what we want to say next in response." And to that he says, "Seek first to understand."

We all know how it feels to be truly heard and understood by someone. We feel lighter, we feel unburdened, we feel cared for. Like the young woman at Subway.

To that end, listening takes work, when we listen for understanding. It's even more work than talking or persuading. And hearing *words* is only the beginning. Do we also hear a person's fears? Do we hear their longings, their

hurts, their joy? Do we hear what's going on at the heart level. This is where the well-timed question or clarifying statement can help. Like, "Say more about that..."

My college pastor, Steve Hayner, used to tell us: the person in front of you at any given moment is the most important person to God in that moment. Someone God cares about deeply. So, we listen for understanding.

3. If we're listening to someone who is saying things we disagree with, or if they are a person we find difficult in the moment, and anger does creep in, and we really want to let them have it, we can take our cue from David, who we heard from in Psalm 39. This is one of the many psalms where David shows us a response to difficult people that is beneficial—to ourselves, and to others. I commend to you also Psalms 36 and 37 as other good examples!

I'd like us to notice in the Psalm that David is dealing with real enemies; people who are out to get him and do real harm to him. And he resolves to keep his mouth shut because he probably knows he's going to say something he regrets later—something that doesn't produce God's righteousness, as James says ☺.

But he confesses how hard it is to keep silence, and how he just can't contain himself. In verses 2-3 he says "I was silent and still and my distress grew

worse...my heart became hot within me... while I mused, the fire burned.” He’s describing heartburn! We know that feeling, don’t we!?... when we’re listening to someone and getting steamed about what they’re saying? Here’s the volcanic eruption brewing, which will produce some hot lava that’ll spill out onto them (and us!).

David continues: “...then I spoke with my mouth...” And what would you expect him to say, then?... If you didn’t know the rest of this psalm, after reading the first part, what do you expect he would say?

David says, “Then I spoke with my mouth: Lord, let me know *my* end... let me know how fleeting *my* life is. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath... For nothing they are in turmoil... And what do I wait for? My hope is in you. Deliver me from all of *my* transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool; I remain silent...”

Well, that isn’t what I would say if I was getting heartburn while listening to someone. And that’s why David’s material is in the Bible and not ours!

What is David doing here? 1. He is taking the opportunity to do some self-reflection, in the face of challenge, and even opposition; and 2. He’s praying for perspective; for the bigger picture. Instead of fussing over what someone else is saying and doing, and getting wrapped up in their foolishness, he’s taking the

time to vent it to God, and taking the opportunity to say, “In the grand scheme of things, I’m not exactly blameless myself, and, is this really worth all of the fuss? Life is too short to get derailed by someone who is obnoxious, and who I may disagree with.”

And *he* does this in a situation of having real enemies who are actively trying to harm him! So, I think to myself, if *he* can pray, “show me my shortcomings and my mortality” in the face of *that*, I can certainly try to pray for perspective and do some self-reflecting in the face of people who hold beliefs and opinions I find disagreeable. Perhaps this is part of what James means by being slow to anger: taking the time to pray inwardly, vent it to God, and do some self-reflecting.

And when we are able to slow ourselves down and self-reflect, it’s important that our self-reflection is not a reflexive *judgement* upon ourselves, or reflexive anger turned back on ourselves. It’s easy to take the judgment we may feel and think toward others and turn it on ourselves instead. Notice, David doesn’t do that. He doesn’t say, “Oh God, show me what a horrible person *I am* for thinking such thoughts and feeling such emotions.” He knows his feelings are legitimate. So he doesn’t criticize himself. He simply asks for perspective. It’s a

compassionate approach toward ourselves, really, as it puts all of our lives into a larger perspective of God's graciousness toward everyone.

Again, there is a time to speak (please talk to each other during the coffee hour after worship; in my imagination I was worried that we'd have nothing but awkward silence after worship! Talk to each other; and, of course, listen). There is a time to speak. And to speak up and speak out. But all of our spiritual masters, Jesus, Paul, and many others throughout the centuries, tell us to do so only after we have taken time to do some reflecting, and consider our words and actions first, in light of God's graciousness and compassion.

Let listening lead.

As mentioned earlier, this is loving people with our ears, evangelism with our ears and with our hearts. Listening and caring as the new form of witness.

In listening well, we witness to Jesus. Yes, with our words, yet more so, and more often, with our ears, with our actions, with our hearts. We witness to the grace of God. Which we now experience at this table.

Come to the Table of Grace