

The Art of Listening

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

With covid uncertainty, change, divisiveness and such, I've been thinking about the question, "How, then, shall we live?" That's actually the title of a book written in the 70's by a theologian who was concerned about the decline of western culture. I'm not going to go *there*, but I have been pondering, what does God require of us during this time? What is Jesus calling us to be and do? How, then, shall we live (as God's people)?

My simple conclusion is: we keep doing what we always do, and do best as followers of Jesus! But with greater intentionality and thoughtfulness, with prayerful awareness, and with as much love as we are able to give. These aren't easy times. And so, for the next 4 weeks I'm going to reflect on some basic practices and principles of our faith that are applicable for our time, which are essential to our witness *and our well-being*. What bears witness to the gospel *and is edifying to us*. We must be people of hope—faith, hope and love! As we anticipate the good future that God is preparing for the world.

At the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, as a charge and final exhortation, the apostle Paul says this: "*Keep alert* (in other words, be prayerfully

aware of what is going on around you; don't sleepwalk through life), *stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.*" (1Cor.

16:13-14) Perhaps these could be our theme verses for the next few weeks.

James 1:19-25

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!

I had the privilege of knowing a man years ago named Add Sewell, who people somehow sensed was a safe person to talk to and spill their guts to. And rightly so. He oozed love and acceptance. He once told me of an experience he had at a Subway getting his lunch one day, and said to the young woman behind the counter: "How's your day going?" And off she went to describe everything that was going on in her life: the conflicts with her roommates, her financial challenges, her anxiety about the future, her frustrations with her coworkers, and so on. All while she was assembling his sandwich. And after she was done making his sandwich, she said to him, "I feel so much better. Thank you for all

your help.” He said, I didn’t saying anything; all I did was listen. Didn’t offer anything except my ears, he said.

He shared that story because he came away concluding that most people are dying to be listened to. And after hearing this story and 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 training for, like for any form of outreach. We can call it evangelism with our ears—which actually begins in our hearts, as we make space for people 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 really listen to and hear people.

Yes, we also should be prepared to share how Jesus has impacted our life and given us hope, by telling our story, but that should come forth at the right time, 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 it pains me to say that it’s sometimes the wordiness of Christians that is causing injury. We need to show the humility (meekness, as James puts it) of being people who are skilled at listening.

As the old saying goes, God gave us one mouth, and two ears—use them in proportion! The image on your bulletin was inspired by a mask I saw someone wearing a couple weeks ago that simply had the words, “I’m listening.” (no logo)

Missiologist and pastor, Alan Roxburgh, in his book “The New Shape of the Church in Our Time,” writes about prioritizing listening as the primary practice for God’s people right now. He talks about the importance of going out into our neighborhoods and really listening: to God, and to our neighbors. It’s one way to show the love of God, and learn about how God is at work in the world.

Before we get specific about listening, a brief note about anger since James mentions it.

James doesn’t tell us *never* to be angry, or say that anger is bad. Neither does Jesus, or the apostle Paul when they talk about anger. What they all say is, *tame* your anger. Don’t let it lead. Don’t let it be our first response, or let our first reaction to someone come from a place of anger. James and Jesus and Paul all teach us to slow it down. Anger doesn’t produce right relationship, James says. That’s how I define righteousness: right relationship. And right relationship is what God desires, and what our lives are meant to produce.

I say this, because anger **is** a legitimate emotion, and some of us may have been shamed by someone who told us that anger is always wrong, or it's bad and therefore when we feel it, we somehow feel like **we** are wrong or bad. There **is** a place for it, and it can fuel us to appropriate action; but only after we have slowed ourselves down, and 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. Be quick to listen. Let that be a first response. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (from *Life Together*): "The first service that one owes to others... consists of listening to them. Just as love of God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for [our neighbor] is learning to listen to them."

This is not to say that there isn't a time to speak. There is, as we hear from Eccl. 3, "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 less often on the "time to be silent" side, which is sorely needed these days. James doesn't say, "Never speak." He says, "*Be slow* to speak." And, be quick to listen.

Listening is an art. Perhaps even a lost art that needs to be recovered. And just like we need all forms of art today—visual arts, the performing arts, poetry,

and a return to contemplation on beauty and all that—we need the art of listening. And like art, there will be mistakes and trial and error and smudges...

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

1. Listening begins with keeping our mouths closed. Not talking is a good first step, as we attempt to silence our inner chatter and discipline our need to get our point across, whether we think we're correcting somebody we believe is wrong, or whether we are trying to fill uncomfortable silence, or if, with all good intentions, we are attempting to impart wisdom or caring to someone in need. Often times in caring it's more important that we don't try to say anything and simply let our presence become the language of compassion and of wisdom. A good example of this is in Job.

Job loses everything: all of his children, all of his property, and eventually his health. Tragedy upon tragedy, and Job has nothing left but his faith (such as it is).

And then along come Job's friends and here is what it says (2:11-13):

¹¹Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home [—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite]. They met together to go and console and comfort him. ¹²When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they

tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads (a sign of deep mourning). ¹³They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

To me, the book of Job could've ended right there and it still would've been a great book (after only two chapters!). Friends just sitting quietly and compassionately with their companion who is in deep grief. It's a beautiful picture.

But... Job's friends decided to open their mouths and try to explain Job's suffering to him and give him advice—for the next 35 chapters! And they come out sounding like fools. This is part of wisdom literature: not only giving us good and wise insights and questions to wrestle with in God's presence, but also giving us examples of what *not to do* in certain situations. And that's what the middle part of Job is: a good example of a bad example. Too many attempts to explain something that can't really be explained, when what was needed was simple presence and compassion. "A time to keep silence..."

As part of learning to keep our mouths closed, 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. Whether we are consoling someone or in the middle of an argument with someone.

Just like good music requires rests, and silent moments (if all the instruments in an orchestra or band were always playing, all the time, it would be frenetic); likewise, Christian listening and caring requires silence, and silent moments. Rests; pauses.

Heidi, when leading grief groups at Children's Hospital, will normalize silence by telling the group, "I'm comfortable with silence." It helps everyone relax and take the time needed to check in with themselves. Then, Heidi says, when I am beginning to feel anxious about the silence, if I wait just one or two heartbeats more, someone will share and express themselves.

In a pamphlet for Chinese immigrants, written by Chinese American citizens, to help their fellow 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." In similar fashion, a web site advises Finnish exchange students that, "an American characteristic is general discomfort with silence in conversations, homes, and working places." It's interesting to hear what other cultures see and understand about our culture.

Now, sometimes as we're listening to someone, silence can be interpreted as judgment, so it might occasionally help to say, "Tell me more," or ask a thoughtful question, or give a well-timed and thoughtful statement of understanding so they know we are tracking with them, with caring and compassion. Good questions and responses can draw people out, and that is needed too, in between moments of silence.

Yet, listening *begins* by keeping silence; inner and outer.

2. When we listen, we listen for understanding. Not for waiting until someone stops talking so then we can say what **we** want to say. Listening in love requires having no agenda, and reaching out to others with affection. Reaching out to others with our heart, *and* with our mind to try to understand, not just their 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 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 and energy, when we listen for understanding; even more work than talking or persuading. Hearing *words* is only the beginning. Do we also hear a person's fears? Do we hear their longings, their hurts, their intentions, their joy? When we listen in this way, we try to be genuinely curious. Like detectives... What's going on at the heart level...

Steve Hayner: the person in front of you is the most important person to God in that moment. Even if they are difficult! They are someone God cares about deeply. Listen for understanding.

Tali Hairston, adjunct professor at SPU, led a workshop on racial reconciliation last fall (and was speaking to mostly white pastors in our Presbytery): "Racial healing *precedes* racial reconciliation; and racial healing begins with listening. Listen to our pain, listen to our stories, listen to our perspective." White folks tend to want to go to reconciliation too quickly, he says. We want to fix things and move on. Start by simply listening; and listen to understand.

3. If we're listening to someone who is saying things we disagree with, and anger does creep in, and we really want to let them have it, we can take

our cue from David in the Psalms. Psalm 39 is one of the many psalms where David shows us a response to difficult people that is beneficial—beneficial to us, and to others. Other examples: Psalms 36, 37

I'd like us to take note that David is dealing with real enemies; people who are out to get him. Like, kill him. So, David has credibility here; he isn't having an argument with someone about masks and vaccines. He's pouring his heart out to God about people who want to end his life!

And as we heard, 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 😊. But he confesses how hard it is to keep silence, and how he just can't contain himself. In verse 3 he says, "My heart became hot within me; while I mused, the fire burned." Anyone know that feeling (while you're listening to someone)? Here's the volcanic eruption brewing, which will produce some hot lava that'll spill out onto someone! So David continues: "...then I spoke with my mouth..." And what did you expect him to say?...

David says, "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...”

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, he’s taking the opportunity to say, “In the grand scheme of things, I’m not blameless either; and, is this really worth all of the fuss? Life is too short to get derailed by someone who is obnoxious to me, who I may disagree with.”

Although in David’s case he is dealing with real enemies who are actively trying to harm him! And 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, slow ourselves down, 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 simply 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 simply slows himself down, and asks for perspective. It's a compassionate approach toward ourselves, actually, as it puts *all* of our lives into a larger perspective of God's love and graciousness toward all, because "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Psalm 103:8 and 145:8-9)

Again, there is a time to speak. And there is another sermon there. But all of our spiritual masters, Jesus, Paul, and many others throughout the centuries, wisely admonish us to speak up and speak out only after we have taken time to do some self-reflecting & silence our inner chatter, 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 the grace of Jesus Christ. Yes, sometimes with our words, yet more so with our ears, with our actions, with our hearts, and with our prayers.