

Listening Is Hard

Wayne Waibel – 09/06/2020

How do we get to the crux of the issue in today's world as we are endlessly pounded with wave after wave of someone else's version of the truth? As Christians we are commanded to give an ear to the marginalized and forgotten of society. It begs the question, precisely who are the marginalized? Are they the fringe elements on the political spectrum, or the ones who scream the loudest for equity and justice? That is why we are expected to listen hard for the faint voices of those who are barely able to speak.

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Scholars generally agree that our Gospel lesson this morning was not actually spoken by Christ. For the Matthean church – there was much conflict and this passage serves to set a foundation for conflict resolution. You'll find essentially the same doctrine in our Book of Order. Please feel free to check it out.

The articles of worship in the Book of Order comprise forty-two pages. You'll find the remaining one hundred thirty-three pages cover the Polity and Rules of Discipline. I guess it could be argued that the Presbyterian "System" doesn't even come close to the volumes we have amassed in living under the rule of law in this country, but still.

Much of what used to be defined as democracy was taken right out of the Book of Order. What we have now in America has almost no resemblance to what was offered by the founding fathers at our country's birth. We have an uncanny ability to find our way back, though.

One of the statements that easily supports the theory that Jesus didn't actually say what was recorded in Matthew 18:15-20 is toward the end. When all steps for reconciliation have been exhausted and success is not achieved, "let him be unto you like a heathen and a tax collector." In His ministry, Jesus spends a fair amount of time with heathens by intent, and one of His own disciples was a tax collector. They may have been outcasts in first century Palestine, but they were not marginalized by our Lord.

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In fairness, I must acknowledge that Matthew's placement of this section of the Gospel between the parable of the lost sheep and the unforgiving debtor was both intentional and genius. The early church experienced colossal conflict at its outset and was much in need of guidance. Though they may not have been Christ's words, they could have been.

What if what was meant by "let them be to you like heathen and a tax collector" was actually – "as long as it takes – forgive."? It is clear from the passage that the directive essentially gives voice to the marginalized. It affords them an avenue of expression, and the key to the whole process is we need to give them an ear.

I know – listening is hard, but as members of God's family we are responsible to and for each other, and any self-serving behavior breaks that unity of fellowship in Christ.

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That is why this passage is so important. It outlines in a couple of paragraphs what the task force who authored the Book of Order required sixty plus pages to elucidate. The entire process of conflict resolution – which – make no mistake – exists frequently in the church – needs to be addressed from the perspective of trying to reclaim the offender, not to punish them. We need to listen. And when we shout – no one hears.

One of the collateral duties I performed in my Naval service was as a drug and alcohol abuse counselor. I received no training, but abuse was so rampant during the Vietnam War that the Navy took a lot of heat for dumping their addicts onto the civilian community, so they put a bunch of procedures and policies on the books to appease the backlash. Most of us counselors were pretty ill-equipped, but we did our best.

There was one sailor that came to me looking for help, and was very sincere in both his assessment that he had a problem and his desire to crawl out of his misery. I spent a couple hours with Dwight as he shared his story and tried to formulate a path to sobriety. In the end – he surrendered his “stash” and began his journey.

Every time we saw each other from that moment until the end of our enlistments he went out of his way to thank me for saving his life. Here’s the thing. I had no idea what I was doing, so during the course of our session – In an effort to keep from saying the wrong thing, I said nothing. Not a word. Not one. Listening is hard – but so powerful – it can actually save a life.

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Love is the essence of discipleship, the basis for transformation. In the verses immediately following today's lection, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother that has sinned against him, and then offers seven as a tentative amount. Christ's response was seventy times seven. In other words – there is no end. When you deal in the kind of love we do as disciples of the risen Lord – there are no limits. Not one.

Love remains as urgent as ever because we live in a world so full of darkness and brokenness. It is beyond urgent. There is no shortage of opportunities to inject love into our daily living. And it doesn't have to be profound to be effective.

Yesterday morning I went to a local diner for some breakfast before starting to write this sermon. Towards the end of my meal a gentleman sat down next to me and ordered two pancakes and a glass of water. When his meal came, the pancakes were the size of the plate. Being the wise guy I am, I quipped, "You going to be able to eat all that yourself?" He looked at me with a very serious smile and said, "Would you like one?" Tiny little gesture of love, but a profound impact.

I'd already set the trajectory of my sermon on a path toward the need to listen despite the difficulty in doing so. Wally offered me one of his two pancakes and I came home and crafted a sermon about love.

Listening is hard, and it is important, but love is the kicker. It is what sets our moral compass on a course to follow that still small voice which reminds us, if you have an obligation, honor it; if you make a promise, keep it; if someone needs to talk, listen. And above all, live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Amen.