

Lectionary 15 + July 16, 2017

Last May, I spent some of my continuing education time at the *Festival of Homiletics*. Homiletics is a fancy name for preaching. What happens at a Festival of Homiletics? Preaching! A lot of preaching.

Each year the conference draws hundreds of pastors from all over the nation and a cadre of well known preachers addresses the conference. This was my first time attending and I was really excited to take the week to breathe in the cumulative wisdom of these fine teachers and preachers.

During the airplane ride to San Antonio where the festival took place, I chatted a bit with the stranger seated next to me. He was very inquisitive and wanted to know about where I was going and what I would be doing. I explained to him that each day we all get together - hundreds of preachers representing a wide range of denominations - to listen. We listen to sermons and we listen to people talk about sermons. I explained we would be listening to two or three sermons a day and two or three talks a day. So, all-in-all, we get to listen to five or six presentations a day.

The fellow looked at me and said, "That sounds like hell."

What is considered heavenly for people in some vocations isn't so heavenly for people in other vocations. Or, maybe - just maybe his comment was less about the preaching vocation and more a comment about the prospect of doing that much listening.

I can tell you that my listening adventure was a mixed bag. I did respond with rapt attention to several of the preachers. Others held my interest well. Others not so much. In a few cases, I was distracted and fell into daydreaming. Once I nodded off.

I guess it depended upon who was speaking, *but not entirely*. Sometimes my response was really about my energy level or how much I was willing or ready to listen. Sometimes listening is hard work and listening can be selective. At times we hear what we want to hear. Sometimes we attend with open ears. Sometimes we listen through filters fashioned by our experiences, opinions, or biases.

Sometimes we just can't take too many words in. How much listening can we do in a day, especially in an age of sound bites and instant communication, where we find our attention spans last about as long as an average text message.

Deep and careful listening has fallen on hard times but it's necessary for the care and well-being of relationships and for growth and discovery.

Listening is critical in the adventure of faith.

The ancient Schema for the people of Israel begins with an appeal to listen: “Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one.” For many observant Jews these words from the book of Deuteronomy remain the centerpiece of both morning and evening prayer.

“Hear, O Israel, God is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and these words shall be upon your heart.”

The command to honor God and love our neighbors begins with the command to listen. “Hear, O Israel...”

Listen, O people of God.

One thing we know about our sacred story in the scriptures is that while God wants a hearing, God’s people have a hearing problem. When God called the prophet Ezekiel, God described the people as a “rebellious lot.”

“They have eyes but do not see; they have ears but do not listen.”

It’s a common theme in the sacred story of our scripture. God wants nothing more than our trust. Yet, time and again, we will not listen.

Finally, and in the fullness of time comes Jesus, the anointed one of God who says: “Let anyone with ears listen!”

Jesus in the wonderful parable identifies different soils that are indicative of various modes of listening. God sows the seed of God’s word and seed falls on different soils. The seed is received well and not so well and resisted and in some instances rejected out of hand.

Seed falls on the path and in seconds, the birds come to snatch them away. I wonder what seed sown by God has been carried away in our hearts with no chance to take root or grow.

Some seed falls on rocky soil where there’s little chance for the seed to enter into the ground. I wonder where troubles have kept the Word from taking root and growing in and among us. How deep are our roots?

Then there’s the seed that falls on thorny soil. The thorns choke the seeds, for the one who hears has been captured by other cares and concerns or the lure of wealth. What other words choke out the word of life - materialism, consumerism, greed, busyness or other distractions?

Then there's the good soil where the seed is received and takes root and the results are amazing. When the seed takes root and grows it yields abundant growth.

And what makes for good soil, good enough to receive God's Word?

Ask it this way: what makes for good listening?

Benedict of Nursia, the sixth century mystic and founder of a community called the Benedictines wrote a rule for his community and to this day, *The Rule of St. Benedict* is a source of wisdom for all kinds of people. In his prologue, Benedict has this gem of wisdom: "Listen with the ear of your heart." Listen with the ear of your heart.

It's an invitation to deep listening and to pay attention to the wondrous works of God. One important way is in reading the scriptures and reading them as a way of praying. Several of you have experienced *Lectio Divina* when a passage is read three times, with a good deal of silence in between and we listen for a word that captures our attention and a word of Christ that speaks directly to us and a word where God is calling us to new journeys of trust.

Many of the ancient Christian prayer practitioners understood such listening to be a great gift, especially when our hearts are hardened. Repentance or turning toward new life was often described by our ancient forebears as a relaxation of the heart and the byproduct of the relaxed heart is the bearing of abundant fruit – the fruit of compassion, the way of love. Sort of like good soil open and ready to receive. In the New Testament, the word for obedience is inextricably tied to listening. Intense listening.

The first order of business in our vocation as disciples is to listen.

Listening that goes even beyond scripture or sermon, it is an invitation to be attentive to the world around us. The more contemporary mystic, Thomas Merton, described the spiritual life as "A simple openness to the next human moment brings us into union with God in Christ."

Please remember, dear friends in Christ, the work of God's Word does not depend upon our listening. God desires open hearts and open ears but God will do God's thing and God will send forth God's Word as surely as the snow falls or the rain pours. "My Word," as we heard the Isaiah passage "will not return to me empty." God will accomplish God's purposes. Yes, this parable may be about different kinds of soils, but it is, first, a parable about God and the work of God. It is the parable of the sower.

God is the sower whose farming techniques would send shivers down the spines of the wheat farmers in my first congregation in rural Idaho.

God is the sower who throws the seed everywhere. No prudence or care or strategy here. With wild abandon, God thaws his seed letting it land where it will. Very consistent with God's generosity.

No, it doesn't always take root or grow in many places but when it does the harvest is rich indeed. See what God is doing!

I wonder, then, if the invitation to listen and so be open is less an obligation and more an opportunity ... to get in on the act of God's life changing and world changing work.

God is up to something in the world and it is often hidden from plain sight for like the proverbial seed, God works in a mystery.

Still, we may perceive it even if we don't fully comprehend it. So pay attention to where you see love as the *modus operandi*. Listen for a word that speaks forgiveness and mercy. Pay attention to miracles of reconciliation and healing of fractured hearts. No, these things do not make headline news. God's abundant work is not big or blustery but often comes in little ways or in places where life is broken and life is restored through the consolation of love. We listen so that our hearts may be relaxed and bear the fruit of compassion.

Back to San Antonio: As I said earlier, my listening was a mixed bag but when I did listen, was I ever surprised!

One of the preachers who presented the gathering was someone whose name is familiar, I know, to some of you. The Spirited Women group has read one of her books. She is Nadia Bolz-Webber, a heavily tattooed, "rough around the edges," straight talking, and in some ways coarse talking pastor, whose books have not necessarily won me over.

So, when she began her sermon, I showed up and listened a little under protest.

Now, I had already heard great preaching but Nadia's sermon was the best of them all because she could say freely and powerfully the good news we often fail to say – that Jesus saves.

Her word had great authority because it came from her very real experience. She spoke of her heart wrenching divorce from her husband of many years. The story has no happy ending. What happened could not be fixed. She described in all honesty how sad and

tragic it was and how in her desolation and sense of depletion she had nowhere to go except to fall into the arms of Jesus.

For reasons beyond my knowing, God's Word through her words moved my heart and maybe by God's good grace a seed was planted and took root. Perhaps my heart was softened or relaxed.

The great promise when the word gets down into our hearts is that the seed takes root and grows and by God's grace bears the fruit of love.

God sows the seeds of Gods' Word. God loves the world into healing. God is doing a merciful thing. May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to receive.

Friends in Christ, listen with the ear of your heart. Amen.