

"Listening Community", Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity,
September 22nd, 2019

Philemon v1-25, Mark 5:21-34.

Back home in Northern Ireland. Easy to forget how things are. How are ye?! People would say. That was Fast! You probably didn't get that. So slower. How are ye? Now, when they say that, they have no interest in knowing. Just a greeting we have. So when you visit N.Ireland, please don't start sharing how you are, they won't expect it! But on the other hand when I ask it, I am interested!

Czech Republic. Missionary Training School. Drahus was a wonderful lady who with her husband did the hospitality. Walking across their square, an American, asked How are you. He kept on walking. She stopped, turned and said to him as he walked past, Why do you ask how I am, if you don't want to know...

Jesus. Approached by Jairus. Jesus goes to heal his sick 12 year old daughter. But he gets interrupted - unexpectedly. The anonymous woman who has been bleeding for 12 years, touches his clothes, she is healed. He stops, asks who touched me - he knows what has happened, but he wants her to come forward for a number of reasons - she steps out and it says" tells the whole truth". Once she stepped out, he could have declared she was healed but he allows her to tell the whole truth - he gives her time, space, attention, he listens.



To be a listening community is our theme today. To recap. This month we look at some of the marks of a Christian community. An intentional community - we are deliberately formed into a community by God, shall we intentionally build meaningful relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Generous community - God models generosity to us - our eucharist, God so loved us, he gave his Son - and a generous community, in OT and esp in NT and Acts, is not only about finances and giving, but also giving time, space, energy and using the gifts and skills that God has given to you - in the Christian Community, or outside in God's world. Welcoming Community. Again, God who welcomes all - the image of Revelation - all tribe nation people and language to worship - who in the end times, judgement by the Son of Man, a fruit he looks for - I was a stranger and you invited me in - fruit of his people, to welcome the stranger, to seek to build relationship, to join into one that which was separate, to draw people together.

Listening Community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer - German theologian executed in during World War 2, wrote:

"Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work they should share."

That is such a great phrase - God the great listener. But it is so true. Just look at the psalms. The prayer book Jesus knew. The range of things that can be said to God. Moses at the burning bush and God listens to all he has to say. In fact, we need so much for God to be the Great Listener! I mean can you imagine that God wasn't a great listener to you. Whenever you want to talk to him he listens. He pays full attention to you. Total attention as Jesus shows to the woman. I was on retreat part of this week and I realised, there, I didn't have doubts with God listening - I expected him to. My concern was, can I hear what he wants to say back!

When we say 'a mark of a Christian community is a listening community' - then it is not about expecting God to listen to us, only, but to ensure we are open and seeking to listen to him. We focused on this for a few weeks in May when we looked at Learning to Hear God's voice. And those talks are on the church website in the sermon section.

We said, firstly, that the Lord speaks via Scripture - his general will, yet at other times scripture seems to be illuminated by the Spirit, reminding or showing the way to act or relate in a particular situation. Secondly. God speaks through the voice of the Spirit - dreams, impressions, visions, prophecy. Thirdly, there is our common sense - as a minister said: 'God's promises of guidance were not given to save us the problem of thinking.'

Fourthly, there are circumstantial signs - is he is the one closing or opening the door. Do the circumstances point in a certain direction or are we to persevere? Finally, there is the counsel of the saints - the advice, wisdom from other believers through whom God can speak.

For us to listen. At times we need to set aside dedicated time. Perhaps like the Monday night Emmaus Walks by Ron and Nienke. As a church we need to consider other ways how we can facilitate times of focused listening. For some of us, have we considered setting aside for a retreat - our life is too hectic to get that time in a regular week. But to plan 2-3 days away, a dedicated time to be with God and to listen to his voice? As a community that can be a gift to each other - to help, to make possible for such time to allow a person or a couple to get way to listen.



Images from www.LumoProject.com.

Listening community, listens to the voice of God. Listening community - we listening to each other. Jesus and the woman. She has had internal bleeding for 12 years. Not just for a few months. What this meant - anything she touched was deemed ceremonially unclean (Lev 15:25-end). The bed is unclean where she lies. To touch her bed makes you unclean. She was not allowed to take part in religious processions or even to go to temple. *We actually read this story in our family bible reading last night.* That story described the woman as an old woman. But was she? We are not told. Could she have had her illness when she was 18 and now she was 30, or in her early 20s and was now 35. She perhaps couldn't marry because of it. Or if she did - was she separated from her husband? What happened to her marriage? Did she have kids? They weren't meant to be unclean, did they break the law each day and so remain unclean themselves til evening? Her social contact surely had become minimal.

Q- how would you feel in that situation?

She touched his clothes in faith. She was determined. She believed he could make a difference. She does not want to draw attention. She knew she was not meant to be there because she was unclean. Jesus lets her tell the whole story. He could have moved on. It was for her sake. Remember. She is an outcast. She just wasn't impoverished through how she had spent all she had on doctors. She was despised and solitary. Now if she had been healed and it was not publically known, it would have been difficult to prove to those who had known she was ill. Jesus understood her sorrows. He had her appear before the crowd. To testify publically she had been healed. He then confirms she had been healed.

She had received power, and now Jesus declares, she now received peace, due to her faith. In all of this, he allows her to "tell why she has touched him."

When we talked about this on the spring teaching day, we shared how comfort can come to talk about all pain and suffering. To be seen and heard. Jesus was busy. He had plenty to do. He had a synagogue leader longing for him to hurry up and get to his home. Yet he gives her the time and attention and listens. Was that part of the healing for her, to share publically, with someone so close - she is at his feet - how the past 12 years have been? Physical healing she received. Spiritual healing - Jesus says - her faith did it. And Emotional healing - peace, through talking and being listened to? It is worth thinking about Jesus interactions for example in John and consider how he is listening - Nicodemus, Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha at Lazarus tomb, Mary Magadlene at the empty tomb, even Peter on the beach of Galilee. Jesus generates a image of totally focused listening.

Mary at Lazarus' tomb



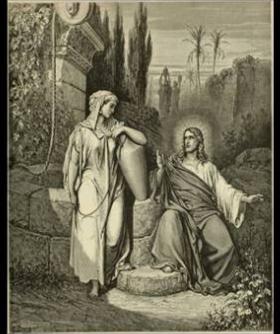
Nicodemus



Mary Magdalene
on Easter Sunday



Samaritan Woman



Images from www.LumoProject.com.

Bonhoeffer says:

"There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening..."

Mary Rose O'Reilly.

"We pay attention only long enough to develop a counter argument... people often listen with an agenda, to see or petition or seduce. Seldom is there a deep open hearted unjudging reception of the other. By contrast if someone truly listens to me, my spirits begins to expand."

Was Jesus a good listener when we consider how he interacted with people? If we follow in his footsteps, are we then to become like the Great Listener? I believe so. Each of us shares in the ministry of listening I believe. We all can listen. Listening can be - just that, to listen. Other times it means listening, asking questions, responding. That can be just one of the gifts we can offer each in community - genuine focused listening.

In our community we have different activities to help us as a listening community.

In our home groups. There is a significant section of engagement with scripture but also sharing with each other - we listen - for some of us, to be really listened to, about a topic or a hurt, it may be the first time; we may gain healing, comfort, encouragement, inspiration as *we listen* - so we are lifted up as we listen. In our groups we may be listening and challenged - like Philemon, as he reads the letter, he listens and is challenged to see things in a new way.

Our Prayer Ministry teams are places to share - they listen to what's on your heart - concerns about personal direction, challenges in work, or pain - and pray with you and for you.

We also have a Pastoral Care and Visiting team - Marianne Tucker and Jolanda - who are willing to visit you and talk and listen about things that matter, and to pray with you. Church may not be a place to share about such things. But Jolanda and Marianne, as part of their work following the Great Listener, are willing to visit you and to talk and listen - do talk to them if you'd like one of them to visit. And these times. Coffee can be great. The Dutch Christian, Corrie ten Boom - who followed Jesus example with the woman - it was said, when you talked with

Corrie, it was like you were her total focus and like the only person in the room. Corrie ten Boom Coffee chats are powerful where you are totally present to the person you are talking with and listening to.

Two further points. Culture. I mentioned Northern Ireland and Czech Republic. If you say to Northern Irish person How are you, they may say nothing...! Seriously, different cultures will treat listening and sharing differently. Some Dutch enjoy going deep. Other cultures, it takes time for this to happen. My feeling for example is that in the UK, it is more naturally on the surface and takes more time. So we are mindful, of our culture we bring to our listening, as we seek to listen to someone of another culture from us.

Second is listening when you know you are right - you disagree with the person who is talking and sharing with you. Very briefly. Paul is dealing with a tricky issue involving Onesimus. The run away slave who became a Christian under Paul's ministry and now he is returning to the master - Philemon - he ran away from. A run away slave could be killed by the master under Roman Law. Paul could have ordered Philemon - as an apostle, to accept back Onesimus - but he appeals from a position of love, v9. He speaks from a place of respect. The letter is not read out in church to shame him- but it was personally addressed to Philemon. Paul sees Philemon as a brother in Christ - a brother he has much to be thankful for and to praise - you could say, in his mind are the many things on which they agree as well as this important issue they perhaps do not agree on. Paul does not force his view down the throat of Philemon. He leaves the decision with Philemon - and they will chat more, when Paul is released from prison. So Paul speaks from a place of love and respect, even though Paul is clear on his views. Paul sees him as

a brother with much to be thankful for. He does not force him to agree. They will discuss more later.

Listening Community - a mark of a church community. A listening community is, listening to God. And a listening community is listening to each other, sharing in the ministry of listening committed to us by the One who is himself the Great Listener.

Shall we pray.

Dear Lord Jesus, Help me take my direction from you, Lord Jesus, for you are the perfect listener. There's no one quicker to listen than you. I never have to snap my fingers to get your attention. I never catch you looking away, as though you're bored with me. I never have to repeat myself several times to make sure you heard what I really said.

You never interrupt me. You never twist what I'm saying. You never talk over me when I'm trying to tell you something. There's no one who listens as attentively, respectfully, and compassionately as you.

Help me become a better and much more engaged listener. Jesus, I don't need healing for deafness but grace for listening—first and foremost to you and secondly to the people you love.

Lord Jesus, I'm confident of your care and expectant of your help. So I pray, in the riches and greatness of your name. Amen.