

Listening

August 18, 1985

So much for the talkers - indeed, reading the gospels carefully – one discovers that Jesus was more of a listener than a lecturer. He was no babbler. He didn't rave on. If he had the gift of tongues, he muggle it. No orator, he was more often silent than speaking. And when he spoke, it was quietly – and always to the situation: no artificial speeches, no polished writings, no published works. Only a few parables, a few conversations, a few sayings – all treasured and saved only in the memories of his friends. Had he “mounted the pulpit” every week, his death would have been the end of him – and quite possibly to his listeners a relief. For who treasures moral lectures? Only an odd few. We only treasure and save those who loved us and cared. These are the ones we never let die. They have God's eternity in our hearts. The talkers we let fade away.

I remember two great aunts from my childhood – one lectured me. The other loved me. When the lecturing one died, I tried to grieve at her funeral – but had some trouble with it. When the one who loved me died – I grieved without trying. So I learned early: true lovers of other folk are listeners rather than lecturers.

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It was certainly true of Jesus. He was not your “preacherly” type who lectured you up and down + all around at the slightest drop of a mistake. He didn't “tell you off” – always “for your own good, of course” – every time he met you. He was more likely to listen to you – and what's more + what's better – to hear you – really hear you, taking in what you had to say, your small jigs and success, your failures and sins + fears.

He listens to Mary and Joseph, not because his parents were the world's smartest, but because he loved them and knew they loved him. He listened to James and John, even when what they wanted was ambitious but dumb. He listened to Peter's blustering and kept his calm. He listened to harassing scribes and pious old Pharisees and to those sinners who were so embarrassed they could hardly speak. He listened to the fears of wealthy Nicodemus and the plea of the poor thief on the cross – and to those two refugees on the road to Emmaus. He listened. He still is – listening ... to us.

Well, thank God, someone is listening. Most talking in this world is to yourself – for no one listens – not often, not for long, not when they can help it. Why not? Because everyone is so eager to tell-out or tell-off, there is no time to take in. At least that's the way we begin to feel – when for the 10th time in one day – we haven't been allowed to express our opinion.

An article in Times observes that city children caught in noise pollution – including traffic, Hi-Fi sets, rock-video + Television and the one-way sound of talking parents, talking family, talking teachers - bombarded – these children tend to withdraw, actually lose I.D., become less able to concentrate + learn – because they've never been listened to. Instead they've been quenched, subdued by the talkers and noisemakers. They're 6 years old and they've never been heard from. They finally give up the fight to express themselves. I remember a little boy who bit people – including his mother. It turned out he had to. She was such a babbler – always raving on – it was the only way he could get her attention. To shut that woman up, you had to do something drastic. So the little boy bit her + the husband drank – vast quantities of something at the Elk's Club!

Another interesting fact about listening – or not – comes from Ann Landers who reports that the problem in American families is no longer run-away children or run-away husband as it once was – now-a-days it is run-away wives. In 1960, 300 fathers run away from home for every one mother. During the last decade, however, for the first time – probably in human history – more wives walk off the job than husbands. The chief reason given? You guessed it: “nobody listens to me” – “no body cares about my opinion.”

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It’s true. As prevalent as hunger is in the world, there are probably more people starving to be listened to – than starving for food. Little children, old folks + you + I – all longing for someone to listen – especially someone who cares. While the endless minorities have all found their voices + now speak out and are heard (the blacks, the Hispanics, the Indian, the poor, the disabled, etc.) – I recently ran across a healthy, young, white, wealthy, Southern Protestant to whom nobody, especially his family, ever listened. I heard him sigh and say, “Listen, I am a minority of one, and I want to be heard – by someone, anyone.” A great many of us feel like a minority of one, longing to be heard. A woman I know turns off the sound of the TV set – so she can talk to it. “and it hears me just as well as my family does,” she says.

My mother always said “to be a good listener is 50% of being a good conversationist.” But to be a good listener even 50% of the time is not easy for some of us. (Especially for some of us who are trained, professional talkers.) (I have a compulsion – to fill every silence – if you want the truth.) We don’t have time to listen. We’re so busy thinking of what we’re going to say next.

Not Jesus. True, he didn’t always reply to foolish questions (like Herod) – but he was never unconcerned, preoccupied, or apathetic. He listened. Best of all he heard. + when he heard - he acted to help. – as in the healing of the nobleman’s son in John.

Sometimes we say, “I’m listening! I’m listening!” but the irritation in our voice shows we are not hearing. + there’s a difference + people who don’t listen – or hear – sure aren’t planning to help.

Now there is, admittedly, too much stupid talking in the world – including well-meaning but dull and endless sermons – and we ought not to have to waste time listening to foolishness.

But as followers of Jesus – and we do call ourselves that, don’t we? – we have to remember that even when he was angry at foolishness, he accepted the fool as in the case of Peter. What is required of us as Christians – therefore – is that we be as kind + courteous+ compassionate to the producer of sound as Jesus was – or as much as we possibly can be by his grace! Remember too – how patient the “others” have to be with us.

As for our own need to talk: one rule – “when in doubt, don’t say it.” You’ll lose your closest friends, alienate your family, your neighbors – all those people you know well – if you never resist the talker’s urge to “tell them off,” to tell them about their irritating mannerisms and other trifling faults. For ex. – when in doubt, do not tell you in-law he bugs you by the way he drinks his soup. Do not tell you dear friend he’s told you that same darn story 5 times already. Do not tell your sister she doesn’t have the foggiest notion about how to raise her children. Do not tell your older folk you’ve heard about their arthritis until you think you’ll scream. Do not tell your spouse he’s getting fat at 40 and tacky too. Remember: if you do, the great likelihood is – it won’t do any good. It won’t solve their problem – it will

only make them mad at you – probably for the next 40 years. Jesus’ “judge not that ye be not judged” is his most forgotten brief word. Come now – most people manage not to mention our most irritating habits – so maybe we better recall Jesus’ “mote + log” story and when in doubt, don’t say it.

Maybe our prayer ought to be: “Lord, make me a lot less eager to tell off + a lot more willing to listen to. Make me more tolerant and less hypercritical. Help me to hear what other lives are trying to tell me, to hear them even when they can’t think of the words, or are too timid to speak them, and it’s only the look in their eyes or the tremor in their hands that’s doing the talking. Help me not to take up all the room in my own life – but to keep making room to let other lives in. Whether they speak in words or body language – let me make room for their laughter + their tears – their successes + failures – their ideals and disappointments – their lives + angers + fears + timidities. In short, Lord, I want to be a Christian – in my heart – in my heart. Amen.”

I’m talkin’ to you, Lord ... Are you listenin’? even to me? Thank God, I believe you are!

Of all the things Jesus never said – the thing he never said the most was “those who have tongues to talk let’em talk!”

What he did say – more than once was “those who have ears to hear – let them hear.”

And he practiced what he didn’t preach.

In short, Jesus was no long-winded talker. All his talking over 3 short years could probably be put on a one-hour tape. Yet with so little talk – he turned the world upside down.

(I have been talking on this corner for 38 years + haven’t even turn Trinity Pack upside down!!)