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## Cultivating attentiveness

*Listening to what is said, and what is left unsaid, is the advent of understanding. And that, says Kevin R. Armstrong, is often the beginning of love.*

by [Kevin R. Armstrong](#)

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*Editor's note: Faith & Leadership offers sermons that shed light on issues of Christian leadership. This sermon was preached Jan. 31, 2010, at [North United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Ind.](#)*

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### [1 Corinthians 13](#)

It is one of the best-known passages of Scripture. You wouldn't even have to open a Bible at any point in your life to have heard these words if you've ever attended a wedding. In fact, couples coming to be married often say to me as we're planning the service, "Now we want to be sure and include that love chapter -- that crazy little thing called love that Paul talks about." And I try to explain to them, "You know that wasn't written for a wedding. That was written for a group of people who came together. They cared about each other, but pretty soon it was clear that some of them thought they had better ideas than some of the other people, and some of them began to have voices that got a little louder than some of the others, and pretty soon they were saying to one another, 'Well, we're all equal. It's just that some of us are more equal than others.'"

And it's at that point that the couple usually looks at me and says, "Yes! Yes, that's exactly what we need read at our wedding."

Oh, there's some wonderful poetry in this chapter. Love is patient and kind. Love is not arrogant, or rude, or boastful. Without love, I'm a clanging cymbal. It's wonderful imagery on how we have

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discovered in our own life that the things we say, if they are not said with love, what they can sound like. But there's also a passage in this chapter that isn't quite as beautiful, quite as poetic, and yet it is on these words that the beauty rests.

When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I understood like a child. But when I became a man, when I became a woman, I put away those childish ways. It's almost as if Paul is saying that love is for grown-ups. But that can't be right. That can't be true, because we all know Jesus had a preference for the children. He always seemed to be saying that. We have a preference for the children. We remember how sweet and innocent and loving they are. We learn from their love as they wrap their arms around us. Why, we even publish books by children that remind us what it means to love unselfishly. And then we remember, or we talk to people who've had children, and it occurs to us that maybe they're not always that way, because we recall that sometimes a child's favorite word is "Mine!" They like it so much they like to say it repeatedly: "Mine! Mine! Mine!" We grown-ups are more sophisticated than that, of course. We have a vocabulary slightly different. We don't come right out and say it that way.

Do you remember that wonderful musical comedy "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change"? It was a wonderful comedy that reminded us of the truth of our lives together, how often we fall in love with somebody because of their looks, their charm, their wit, their humor, their intelligence -- and then a few months pass along and we suddenly realize how much they would benefit from our wisdom about who they ought to become.

All too often this thing called love needs a little growing up. And the grown-up Christian recognizes that marriages and friendships and relationships and church communities bring together all kinds of different people with different gifts and different ideas. And, as wonderful as it is, sometimes that all just sort of drives us crazy. And we are reminded once again: Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not arrogant, resentful, rude.

When I was a child, I understood as a child ... But understanding is so difficult to understand, isn't it? The advent of understanding, the starting posture of understanding, is listening. A grown-up love listens. It listens not just with the ears; it listens with the heart. It listens in a way that listens deeply, not only to what is being said, but also to what is left unsaid.

Lonni Collins Pratt is the co-author of a book some of you have been reading called "Radical Hospitality," and she talks about the time that she and her husband lived across the road from a small log cabin. It was empty for much of the time, but then someone moved in. A man moved in to start to fix up the cabin, and, while Lonni was quite an introvert, her husband wasn't, and was quick to go over and introduce himself and talk with the man who lived there. Lonni's husband came back and said, "You really ought to get to know this guy. He's fascinating. He's fixing up this place. It's going to be wonderful."

A few weeks passed and then, in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, Lonni heard a scream -- a scream of an adult that came from across the road. She knew it was coming from that cabin. She bolted straight up in her bed because it was the kind of scream that wakes you up in the middle of the night and makes you want to just hide in a corner. And she went to the window, and she listened until that scream began to fade. And she went back to bed, but she could hardly sleep. And the next night the same thing happened: a scream coming from the cabin.

The next day was a cool October day, and she had made some chili. So she took a big bowl of the chili and a thermos of coffee and a couple slices of pie, and she went over, and she knocked on the door. And she met Les, the man who lived there. Les, she said, looks a little bit like Willie Nelson. And he was very gracious and let her in, and they sat down, and they ate the chili and the pie, and as they were finishing up drinking coffee, Les was talking about his life, how he liked to fix up little houses and fix them up in such a way that eventually some young family would come in and take it over and improve the neighborhood. He never stayed in one place very long, Les said. He had moved to a lot of places, didn't have a lot of family and friends, but that was OK. He got to know people as he moved around. And then he said he had been in Vietnam, a place he said that was pretty hard to get out of; in fact, most of the time he feels like he's still living there.

And because Lonni listened deeply, she heard the things that he said though he never really used the words. What he really said to her was that I hope you'll tolerate this season of screaming from a man who'll eventually move on. Share this season of suffering, and then, one day, a nice young family will come in across the street and it will be much better. But, for now, I appreciate the fact that you'd be

willing to smile at a man in the morning after you've probably heard him scream at night.

She says when you really listen to someone scream against the darkness you're never the same anymore. It's true, isn't it? A grown-up love listens deeply. It listens to the words that are being said, and it listens deeply to what the heart is also saying even though sometimes the heart can't find the words to put it all together. Listening in that sort of way, I think, is the beginning of understanding. And the beginning of understanding is often the advent of a love like that described by Paul in the passage today.

This summer, while I'm away on clergy renewal, the theme of that renewal for me is attentiveness -- trying to learn to pay attention again, to recover some of the skills and habits and practices that sometimes have grown weary. Through photography and poetry, I hope to be able again to focus my attention on God, on my family, on our life together. And, while I'm away, there will be an opportunity for you, as a part of this community, to do the same thing: to share in those arts in such a way that we become more attentive to the way that God is at work in every person here, and the way that God is living and at work in the neighborhood around us.

When I was in grade school, I had a Sunday school teacher named Clara Burr. Clara did an awful lot of listening to a group of us who did an awful lot of talking. And I remember on one particular Sunday we were reading through our old King James Version of the Bible that we had in the Sunday school class, the red-letter edition where it was marked clearly what words Jesus had to say. And one of the erudite in our class raised his hand and said, "Miss Burr, why is it if Jesus is so important, there aren't that many red letters in this Bible?" Well, we thought to ourselves, this guy has got a good point. Yeah. It's our side, 1; the Sunday school teacher, 0. And Clara had a bit of a pause, as she often did, and then she said, "Well, Dale, I guess it's probably because Jesus listened a lot more than he talked."

Real understanding comes from real listening, doesn't it? And real listening, grown-up listening, isn't simply waiting for the chance to speak. Grown-up listening takes courage, because we might just hear some things that will change us.

Jeremiah listened. According to the story, Jeremiah listened to a voice from God. Now we moderns are a little skeptical about that. Some of us will take it on face value that what Jeremiah heard was God's voice, but others of us will want to make sure that it's really God's voice [and not] just some other whacked-out understanding going on inside our head. Was it really God who spoke? Whatever the case was, Jeremiah listened and responded to that voice, and said, "Not me! Not me! I'm just a boy. I'm too little." And that voice said to Jeremiah again, "Don't say you're just a child" -- because sometimes it's the children who have listened most closely, closely enough that sometimes they're the ones who act like the grown-ups in the room. They've listened deeply, heard plainly, and they behave in such a way that when they do what we have tried to teach them, it kind of worries us. We're not sure we might have done the same thing.

My friend Kyle Childress is a Baptist pastor down in Nacogdoches, Texas. Something tells me that living in a place called Nacogdoches makes you a really good storyteller. At least that's the way it is with Kyle, because whenever he leans back in his chair and says, "Well," we all lean forward and listen, because we know Kyle has something to say.

He told a group of us this story one time about a young, gangly, self-conscious teenage girl in his congregation who also ran on the track team, and how one Saturday their meet had been cancelled because of the weather, so they postponed the meet to the following week. But this young girl went to the coach and said, "I can't be here, Coach. You see, our church has a mission trip, and we're going to be taking off, and so I've made a commitment to them. I won't be here." And the coach wasted no time in saying, "I don't care what kind of commitment you made, you first made a commitment to this team, and your team is counting on you, and you better be here." And she left in tears. And the second day she went back and she said, "Coach, I'm not going to be able to be at the meet. I'm on this mission trip, and I made a promise I'd be there." And he said, "And you also made a promise to this team. So if you intend to be a part of this team, you'll be here next Saturday, and if you're not going to be here next Saturday, I want your uniform." And she left in tears, and the next day she came back. She handed him the uniform.

Now Kyle says where he comes from, there were two possible responses to that. One was the parents should all get together and decide who was going to go whup the coach. The other possibility was that all the church people in town get together, they'd go to the school board and they'd demand that there be no school activities at the same time that there were church activities. But he said, surprise of all

surprises, neither one of those things happened. He said everybody sided with the coach. It was kind of sad, but they understood.

Here was this girl who sided with God and with the church exactly as the grown-ups on any other occasion probably would have said that they taught her to do. And yet ... And Kyle paused long enough, like a good storyteller, to let it all set in, because he knew that all of us were thinking about the teenagers we have known in our life who have practiced a grown-up kind of love that isn't arrogant or rude, but was patient and self-giving. We thought about the teenagers who've made commitments in their life to do things that we would have said we wanted them to do, but then when they've up and done it, we thought to ourselves, is that really the wise thing to do? They way they travel to places, the way they reach out to people who scare us, and they show us what it means to love in a grown-up sort of way. And when Kyle knew that those thoughts were passing through our mind, he says, "Well, you know, I mean, it wasn't race relations, or stopping a war, or climbing on a cross, or anything, was it? But I guess a prophet's got to start somewhere."

Yeah. Don't you think? Prophets being the kind of folks who, regardless of age, help us to listen more deeply, who teach us that listening is the primal call of human hearts. We all want to be heard. We all want someone to listen, because listening is the deep attentiveness to all of life, and not just to parts.

As we move ahead in this congregation in this year focusing our attention on that strange practice called radical hospitality, we'll continue to recall how we listen well, because you know listening, while it can be beautiful, can also be terrifying. Listening can open us up to a world of great delight and surprise, but it can also change us, and that change can sometimes be very frightening.

Maybe you'd be willing sometime this afternoon, this week, just to stop for a moment and recall a person who you feel listened deeply to your life. Maybe it was someone who practiced radical hospitality by taking a risk on you at work or at home. They heard what you said as well as what you didn't or couldn't say. Someone you felt really heard you at a time of great joy or of great need, great sorrow or great confusion. What was it that took place that allowed such a memorable moment to continue in your life? And with that experience in your heart and your mind, is there somebody else who you may be called to listen to?

Maybe it's a co-worker uncertain about her future or a classmate who feels that no one is listening. Maybe it's that person you've been meaning to visit in a nursing home or maybe it's somebody under your own roof who really hasn't had your ear for quite a while. It may even be a complete stranger who you encounter this week who you would have otherwise run right past like a two-year-old on the way to the toy box. But maybe this week, just once you'll stop long enough to listen -- listen deeply in a way that you might not have. That's all. Just listen.

There was a lovely book published a few years ago called "Listening Is an Act of Love." Some would say that maybe that's the greatest gift of all. Amen.