



The Art of Listening

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
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When I was in law school in the nineties I lived in Manhattan on the West Side, in a tiny studio apartment on the 9th floor of a building at the corner of 102nd Street and Broadway. I could hear and feel the vibrations of the subway in my apartment on the 9th floor, and everything that was going on in the street below me. I had always lived in urban areas, but nothing had prepared me for the sheer volume of life in New York. But eventually I got used to it. There was one time I was talking on a long distance call to someone on the phone and she said, “What is that NOISE?” And I had no idea what she was talking about. Eventually I realized she meant the sound of police sirens wailing in the street below me, which had become so familiar that I didn’t even hear them anymore.

So we in Minnesota are incredibly fortunate to have a lot more quiet than that, even here in Minneapolis. But actually, in some ways, I think we’re living with even more noise now than we were back then. Our phones and watches are chirping and buzzing 24 hours a day, and if you’re on social media that exponentially increases the number of people who can communicate with you personally and who talk about every aspect of their life and opinions. There are approximately 24 people who are currently hoping to run for President in our country’s 2020 elections, and each one of them is telling a story about what is wrong with this country and how they are going to fix it. Finally, I myself have lots of opinions and noise inside my own head, which sometimes I can recognize as what Buddhists like to call “monkey mind”, and sometimes I get super attached to the story I’m telling

in my head about what is happening in the world around me. The cacophony is thunderous. If you're like me, you've developed a number of habits to drown out the noise, some of them conscious and some of them less so. I think it's tempting to most of us to tune out the voices we disagree with or dislike. Amid all the noise, it seems to me that we're anxious about what we see in the world around us and are desperate to hear something that sounds real—like a fair description of the complexity of what's going on around us, instead of a partisan simplification that assumes the worst of the other side and the best of our side. We're listening for a story that sounds true to us, and that leads to authentic hope—not optimism, not denial, not rage or despair or anxiety, but a real and reasonable hope.

And in the middle of all that noise, there is still an art, an incredibly important art, in fact maybe the most important art left to us at this point in history. It is the art of listening. Who are you listening to? How are you listening? Regardless of what is being said, what are you hearing? What is the story you are telling in your own head about what is real? When I was in training to become a spiritual director, they taught us to learn to listen on three levels simultaneously. You listen to the person in front of you, and what they are saying and not saying. You listen to the various reactions inside your own being, knowing that some of them will be helpful, and others not so much. And in the middle of all of that, you listen for the voice of God. What is God's Spirit seeking to do in and through this person and in the conversation you are having with them?

In today's gospel story Jesus says some really interesting things about listening and failing to listen. I don't know if you noticed that part, because it's not obvious. In this story some people ask Jesus to just be clear with them. "Tell us plainly whether or not you are the Messiah," they say. I sympathize with them. I'd like clarity amid all the noise. I'd like to know the truth about where people are coming from and who they are, or at least

who they think they are. But Jesus essentially says, the things I have done have told you who I am, and you don't believe them because you don't recognize my voice. He's implying that they haven't really listened—that if they had paid attention to what he had done, they would know who he was. So let me give you a little background to know the context in which this conversation is happening.

Today's gospel reading is the continuation of a story, in John chapters 9-10, of when Jesus heals a man born blind. Jesus heals this man on the Sabbath, which stirs up all kinds of controversy because you're not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath. So the leaders in the synagogue are arguing with the man who had been born blind and who now can see, asking him whether or not Jesus is from God. The man says, basically, "Never in the history of the world has anyone given sight to someone who was born blind. He couldn't have done it unless he was from God." But they mock the man because he is no religious expert, and eventually they kick him out of the synagogue. Later Jesus goes and finds him and teaches him and deepens his relationship with the man. This man, who hasn't yet learned how to interpret what he can now finally see for the first time, does know all about hearing, and he recognizes Jesus' voice as the one who healed him. So Jesus says that he is the good shepherd, and that his sheep recognize his voice and follow him, because they've learned to trust him. They know he will risk his life for the sheep to protect them.

The things Jesus has done, the things that Jesus says should explain who he is to anyone who is listening with their whole being, are about healing and giving life. Jesus has turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, to show that God is seeking to grant us joy and abundance and celebration where we have run out of resources. Jesus has met the Samaritan woman at the well, this marginalized woman that socially should have been invisible to him, and seen her for who she truly is. Jesus has healed a man who had been stuck in illness 38 years with no one to help him. He has

turned a few loaves and fish into enough food for 5000 hungry people, and has calmed a storm that threatened the lives of his disciples. After a while, you start to see a consistent pattern of who Jesus is. He is about providing healing and life and abundance to people who have no hope. And seeing this pattern, and recognizing its worth for us personally, is more like learning to recognize and turn toward a voice than it is intellectually understanding something about someone. It's more like a baby in utero who learns to recognize its mother's voice before it is even born. It's like the man born blind who had never seen a human being, but who heard Jesus' voice asking him if he wanted to be healed, and who was willing to do what Jesus told him to be healed. It's like sheep, who studies have shown are actually have nearly the same ability to recognize a human face and a human voice as people do, who trust their shepherd but don't trust others. They trust their shepherd because he has proven to them that he will risk his life for them to protect them from wild animals. He consistently leads them to good pasture and good water during the day, and then and back to the fold to be protected at night.

So Jesus is saying that if you will listen to him with your whole body, your whole being, you will see that over and over again, he is about life and healing and the overwhelming love of God. That he could only be sent from God. And then, this kind of listening leads naturally toward following him—because we will always return to the source of nourishment and life. And in the middle of all the noise we are all hearing all the time, we in today's world need that nourishment and life, but where are we to get it?

Every tradition has practices of silence, which is really about stopping the endless internal chatter and reaction and interpretation that we have going on in our minds, and just listening. Yogis and Buddhists meditate and cultivate lovingkindness and mindfulness in their daily lives. Christians also have a practice of silence, called centering prayer. It is a silent prayer where we choose a sacred word that we use to remain grounded in the intention

to consent to the presence and action of God. Let me say that again. In centering prayer, we seek to consent to the presence and action of God. We take a bold step in affirming that God is actually here, that God is actually doing things, and that instead of willing and problem solving and fixing all the time, we can just listen, and trust God to do things in us and through us. When we do this as a practice, over time, you start to hear things differently. You start to see things differently. You react less, and become more curious. Your heart softens and expands, because you are no longer constantly at the mercy of all the noise. Then you can learn to listen differently to other people. Rie Gilsdorf introduced me to an organization called the Presencing Institute, and they talk about generative listening—listening with open mind, open heart, and open will.¹

So we can talk about listening, or we can actually listen. I'd like to end this homily by inviting us to a brief spiritual practice. First, please close your eyes. I'll invite you to gently, compassionately, become aware of the noise or the story or the problem that has most dominated your attention and awareness. Then step back from it a bit, and see if you can imagine trusting that God in Christ can help you. Let's take a minute to be silent, not solving this problem, but listening for the presence of God. Let's seek to consent to the presence and action of God. If you let your awareness expand, are there patterns in your life of where you see genuine healing and life? This is where God is. Turn toward the voice of those experiences, like a baby toward its mother, or like a sheep following a shepherd. Let us reclaim the art of listening. Amen.

¹ This kind of listening, called "generative listening," is referenced at [Generative Listening](#).