



"You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." James 1:19

A family settled down for dinner at a restaurant. The waitress first took the order of the adults, then turned to the seven year old. *"What will you have?"* she asked. The boy looked around the table timidly and said, *"I would like to have a hot dog."* Before the waitress could write down the order, the mother interrupted. *"No hot dogs,"* she said, *"Get him a steak with mashed potatoes and carrots."* The waitress ignored her. *"Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?"* she asked the boy. *"Ketchup."* *"Coming up in a minute,"* said the waitress as she started for the kitchen. There was a stunned silence when she left. Finally the boy looked at everyone present and said, *"Know what? She thinks I'm real!"*

I've been trying to do a lot of listening lately. With so much going on in the world it's sometimes hard to distinguish the voices that have something pertinent to say, from the ones just blowing smoke. But I've found that if I'm patient and quiet those voices I need to hear most will become clearer. And, God's voice becomes more explicit as well. Here's what I'm learning about the power of listening:

As the boy in the story discovered, **listening makes the other person real.** If you've ever been in a meeting or gathering and have been ignored when you are talking, then you understand. One is only real if one's thoughts and ideas are being listened to. Listening means the other person is being taken seriously.

Listening validates the other person's experience. I've been trying to listen to the voices who are describing things that might be foreign to me, not part of my own experience. When I do that it gives the other person's experience value; whatever the other person has gone through is worthy of attention.

Listening places one's own experience within a broader context. I think we have a propensity toward thinking that our experience is the only one; that everyone's encounter with the world is the same as ours, and that we have similar perspectives. Of course, that's not true. When I try to set my own life's journey to the side and truly listen to how another person is traveling through life it helps me feel more connected - to the other person and to the world.

Listening leads to understanding. One of the best pieces of advice I've ever been given is that you can't learn anything when you're talking. You have to listen in order to learn. Something I've been trying to do besides just listening is to ask myself what the other person is really trying to say. Our culture has become quite reactive since the COVID outbreak coupled with the unrest triggered by the killing of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks. A lot of voices are shouting a lot of different things. It's easy to make a judgment based on a single statement especially if that statement is made in the heat of the moment. I might not like what I think I'm hearing at first blush, but if I take a couple of steps back and try to find a broader meaning, I'm usually able to discern the most salient point. Now I have something to work with that could lead to bridge building.

It seems to me that Jesus must have done an awful lot of listening. First, to God when he went away to lonely places to pray. Second, to the questions and concerns of his disciples as they tried to understand his teachings. And finally, to the people who came to him as broken vessels pleading to be restored to wholeness. I can imagine this is how Jesus developed such a great depth of empathy, and how he was able to maintain his focus.

Who do we need to listen to more? How can we put ourselves in a position to increase our listening? What impact might that renewed commitment to listening have on our relationships with members of our church family?

In Christ,

Pastor Chuck

Let us pray. Gracious God, there are so many voices vying for our attention. Help us to listen to new voices we have not heard before, to voices that say things we don't agree with, and voices that could deepen our understanding of the world you have created. But most of all, help us to take time to listen to your voice. Amen