

“Hear the Cross”

16th Sunday after Pentecost - 9.12.21 - Psalm 116:1-9 & Mark 8:27-38

LISTENING. If there is anything we must learn again and again - over and over throughout the years of our lives - it is to listen. From a child learning the rules of survival (Don't swim alone. Look both ways. don't touch the stove) to students who must actively focus on what their teachers are telling them (in case it's on the test!) to disappointments, regrets and worries of our life partners - we are only fully human if we are in relationship - and relationships are fueled by how well we *listen*.

Listening is one of the hardest and one of the easiest things that we do. I mean, how many times have you found yourself unwilling to part from a friend or a loved one or a fascinating TED talk, because of the speaker's voice - or message - or simply because two are better than one. Listening is the glue that makes us whole; it is the better part of sharing; it is the place where many have actually heard the voice of God. And that changes us. In *The Chosen* series (which we are watching and discussing) Mary Magdalene describes her new life. *“I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in between was him.”*

Today's story from Mark's Gospel gives us another life-changing example of *really listening*. Here's the setting: Jesus has been healing and teaching and spreading the good news of God's love in any way he can, wherever he can. As his growing band of disciples are traveling through the small villages around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks them, *“Who do people say that I am?”* I'll bet the response to *that* conversation-starter was a whole lot of silence. (crickets!) It was their first test of their listening skills, and how the people were making sense of what was happening to them.

So, since Peter will come into sharp focus very soon in this exchange, let's imagine it from *his* point of view. Jesus asks them, *“Who do people say that I am?”* The Bible text says, *“They answered him, ‘John the Baptist.’”* Peter was probably thinking, *“Nah...”* Others offered up the name, *“Elijah!”* - perhaps checking to see if Jesus would reveal that **he** was the prophet Elijah, who was expected to return before the imminent arrival of their long-awaited Messiah. Peter is silent.

But now the others are engaged in this guessing game, and suggest a broader interpretation, *“One of the prophets!”* Surely that would fit who folks thought Jesus was! But Peter had already decided who Jesus was, and he didn't care what other people were saying about him. So, in the instant that Jesus asks, *“But who do you say that I am?”* it is Peter who jumps right in with, *“You ARE the Messiah.”* There. Peter had given voice to it for all of them all. Peter had probably been listening for awhile as his companions tried to figure out if Jesus was - or was not - the One they had all prayed for their whole lives. The Christ. Anointed One. Messiah.

And thus, the time was ripe to start to prepare them all for the rest of his time among them. They were no longer strangers and students - he would soon call them “friends.” Chapter 8 is halfway into Mark, so Jesus begins to share the fate he knows lies before him. He could not be more clear: He will suffer, as will they. He will be rejected by the religious establishment, who should be rejoicing at his presence and his work to bring in the Kingdom of God. He says he will be killed, but after three days, he will rise again.

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was *listening carefully*, but he could not hear, because his heart got in the way. His first reaction was to refute - to tell Jesus that what he was saying couldn't possibly happen. So, Jesus told him with piercing honesty that it was true. **All of it would happen**. So he tells Peter urgently that now is the time to learn to listen in a whole different way - by setting his mind on God's plan rather than his own plans. Because the Messiah that Peter expected - the Messiah that Peter confessed - would **not** be revealed the way Peter had

imagined him or understood him. Now Peter had to hear with different ears. For Peter had been caught in his own misconceptions - as we often are - and what he was hearing from Jesus just **wrecked** him.

Have you ever been humbled to the point that you were literally driven to your knees in prayer? I have. I have experienced a betrayal that I could not see, until the moment came when I could not remain blind one. more. moment. And in that moment, I was driven to my knees in pain and sadness, and there was absolutely no place to turn but to God.

So, I prayed. For my friend. For myself. For the relationship. For my sanity... I would bet that many of you have had those moments. Perhaps not moments of betrayal, but of fear: *Fear of dying* could drive you to cry out to God for the sake of your own body. Or, the *actual death of a loved one* will humble your soul. Or, maybe there were times *when life was just too much* - too much discord, too much pain - too much tragedy, too much violence. *The burdens* of your lifestyle, your work, your family, or your own errors, failures or sin might overwhelm you.

You listen, but there are no answers inside of you. So. There is no place to go but to God. And God listens. Take another look at our Hymn of Praise today as I read a different translation of Psalm 116:1-9:

"I love the LORD, who has heard my voice, and listened to my cries, for the LORD has given ear to me, whenever I called.

The snares of death encompassed me; the anguish of the grave came upon me; I suffered grief and sorrow. Then, I called upon the name of the LORD: "O LORD, I pray you, save my life!"

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD watches over the innocent; I was brought low, God saved me.

Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For you have rescued my life from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. I will walk in the presence of the LORD in the land of the living."

What Jesus says next - to Peter and all who were with the disciples that day - echoes in our times of trouble. "*Take up your cross and follow me*" is about nothing less than facing those moments and knowing in your bones that you are not alone. Because the cross - for Christians - is not merely an instrument of violence and death - it is the necessary antidote to the events of our Good Fridays that bring about Easter - our lives resurrected out of the ashes and debris and the tears of so much death. Taking up our cross is believing in the hope that Jesus promises - the absolute and humbling mystery of God's overpowering and never-ending love for us.

So, LISTEN, and receive the simple words of author Ann Lamott: I do not at all understand the mystery of grace - only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.

Our former intern, Pastor Joel Neubauer, wrote this week on Psalm 116. "It is grace -- it is faith -- it is love, therefore, we praise with this ancient psalm of God's people: "the Lord has given ear to me whenever I called." ...God gives us this devotion of heaven's freeing work, listening as ever God has, in the ear of Jesus." Finally, let me conclude with Joel's prayer:

There is an utter miracle in prayer - before my questions are asked, and before my concerns are voiced, and before your will is done for me, and yes, before my thanks remembers you: you listen to me, whatever I tell you, and it is a holy miracle to be heard." Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS.