

February 18, 2007/Transfiguration of Jesus/David L. Edwards

Listening (and Not Listening) to Jesus

Luke 9:28-43 *“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”*

*The Christian life is as simple and challenging as this:
to love God and to love that which God loves.*

This is the central meaning of faith. --Marcus Borg

There are two scenes in our reading from Luke’s gospel. Through them runs at least this one thread of a message: Being people of faith means listening to Jesus and living what we hear. That is how our lives find fulfillment as channels of God’s love, compassion, peace, and justice. Most often the problem is that we are not really listening to Jesus but to other voices.

Scene one is the Transfiguration of Jesus, who takes the inner circle of disciples up “the mountain” where he enters into prayer. In the gospel stories, whenever Jesus prays, it is a signal that something important is about to happen. Maybe here is a message for us, too. When we enter into prayer, the quieting our hearts and minds so that we listen to God, our lives are poised to become instruments of something God wants to do through us.

As he is praying, Jesus’ appearance changes. He glows with a kind of divine aura. The disciples are in a half-sleep, drowsy but awake enough to see what is going on. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus about his journey toward Jerusalem. It is referred to as his “departure,” the Greek word literally translated “exodus.” It is the fulfillment of Jesus’ life, culminating in his suffering and death, then his resurrection.

Peter feels compelled to say something. We are often like that. When there is something going on of a deeper spiritual nature, when we are in the presence of what Celtic Christianity calls “thin places” where the sacred dimension of life is experienced most clearly, we sometimes just can’t keep quiet! The major spiritual traditions all recognize that the most appropriate response to the presence of the sacred is silence, not speaking. The Tao te Ching puts it most bluntly: Those who know don’t talk; those who talk don’t know. Silent awareness is the most basic practice of the spiritual life.

In his sluggish and uneasy state, Peter thinks that this experience should be made permanent. Let’s build three tents or booths and just

stay here and enjoy this moment forever. When we have some kind of deep and fulfilling experience or awareness of the sacred dimension of life, we want to make it permanent. But life moves on. We aren’t meant to stay in such moments. We glean from them whatever encouragement, inspiration, and insight they bring, and we move on to the succeeding moments of our lives. Jesus is not interested in cultivating religious experiences. Faith for him is not having a spiritually exciting experience or a permanent spiritual “high.” Faith is about our living from moment to moment with an awareness of the sacred dimension of life.

Suddenly a cloud swallows up the disciples and Jesus. It is a symbol of the ultimate mystery of God. It is the “cloud of unknowing” spoken of by Christian mystics who understood that the deepest knowledge of God is not knowing. Peter and the others are finally reduced to silence. In this silence God’s voice is heard: This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!

The whole story has been moving toward these words: Listen to him! That has been the problem. As we read Luke’s gospel, or the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well, we see that the disciples just have not been getting it. They aren’t really listen and hearing what Jesus is talking about. They have their own fixed and socially conditioned ideas of what he should be and how he should do things. The story of the transfiguration pulls out all the stops to show Jesus as the one sent by God to show the way and to say in bold letters: Listen to him!

The cloud goes away. Things are back to normal. The disciples and Jesus go back down the mountain, as they must. The disciples say nothing to anyone about what happened. Mark’s gospel has Jesus “ordering” the disciples to keep quiet about it until after his death and resurrection (Mk. 9:9). Again silence is important because it is too easy to misunderstand and misrepresent Jesus, who he is and what he is about. After his suffering and death, and God’s raising him to new life, the real meaning of his life can be better understood. But even then, it is so easy to not listen to Jesus, to think we know what he is about, and to misrepresent him to the world. Silence and listening continue to be basic spiritual practices for us, for the Christian church as a whole.

Our not listening to Jesus is evident. Churches blend Christianity with nationalism and militarism, putting the cross and the flag side by side in their sanctuaries and beating the drums for war, exploitation, and injustice. Mega-churches are growing up around a “gospel of economic prosperity,” telling people that Jesus’ message is about their becoming rich and successful. The Jesus of the poor, the rejected, the suffering is completely absent. Christianity has become

spiritually dogmatic and judgmental toward other faith traditions, ignoring the Jesus of the gospels who taught that all who seek to do God's will are part of his spiritual family (Mk. 3:31-35). Glaringly evident today is Christianity's not listening to Jesus who teaches and embodies nonviolence and love of enemies, and who regarded the world as the sacred creation of God. And too often the church has presented Christian faith as about obeying laws and being morally perfect rather than loving relationships with God, other people, the creation, and ourselves.

All of this is not a failure of the Christian message and spiritual tradition. It is a failure of Christians to listen to Jesus and then to live what they hear. Practicing silence and inner listening is foundational to the spiritual life. What we call the inward journey—prayer, meditation, study, reflection—is essential to living lives that are rooted in listening to Jesus.

In scene two, a man in the crowd calls out to Jesus that his son is possessed by a demon that throws him on the ground and shakes him violently. What we know as epilepsy was attributed to demon possession. The man asked the disciples to cast it out but they did not have enough power to do it (this is the literal meaning of the Greek here). Jesus' response is rather extraordinary. He launches into a frustrated tirade. You faithless and perverse generation! How long do I have to put up with you? This seems pretty out of character for the Jesus we have in our heads—gentle Jesus meek and mild, who is always kind and understanding, never losing patience.

What do we do with this uncomfortable picture of Jesus? I did not find a great deal of help in the commentaries I read this week. Some overlooked it. Some touched on it but quickly went on to say that the purpose of the story is to show Jesus as a great healer who is always more powerful than we are. I did not find that convincing. I think there is more to it than that. Jesus' "meltdown" must have some significance. Let's take him at his words. He is fed up with faithlessness. Perversity I don't know about; that does seem a little over-the-top! But Jesus is clearly at the end of his rope about what he had hoped to see in people's lives, especially his own followers. Jesus fully believed we are capable of faithful living. But at this point his disappointment and frustration boil over.

What does Jesus mean by faith and faithlessness? He does not mean what we think of today as faith--believing certain religious ideas or doctrines about God or Jesus. Marcus Borg, in his book *THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY*, makes it clear that the Bible itself never

means faith in that sense. Faith is about living out our relationship with God and others and ourselves, a relationship defined as love. Faith is about a way of living our lives, not about stuff in our heads. Jesus is frustrated with the disciples and others, including this man seeking his help. Jesus heals many people. Jesus performs "miracles" that stir people up and get them excited. But that is not what he is really about. He wants people to live the life they were created to live. It is the life of faith. Faith is not ideas or doctrines or believing in beliefs. It is a life in relation to God and others and the world as creation, a life characterized by love and kindness and compassion and justice. But people keep flocking to him so that he will amaze them or cure them or otherwise to get something out of him. And no one seems to be listening as he calls them into the life of God's kingdom, God's reign over the life of the world. People just don't seem to be getting it, that they have it within them to be channels of God's love and power and spirit. Faith for Jesus is a life of giving ourselves to God and others and the world as instruments of life.

This is where our reading ends and where the sermon ends. We are left more in wonder than with answers. This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him! Jesus is affirmed as one whose life is full of God, just as our lives can be when we listen to him. Lent has traditionally been and can be for us now a season of renewed listening. It is the kind of inner listening that re-awakens in us a life of faith, a life of loving God and loving what, and who, God loves (Marcus Borg).