

Listening (and Not Listening) to Jesus

Luke 9:28-43

"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

There are two scenes in our reading from Luke's gospel. A core message seems to run through them: Being people of faith means listening to Jesus and living what we hear. This is how we find fullness of life and become channels of God's love, compassion, peace, and justice. The problem is that we listen to so many voices other than Jesus' voice. That is why we have this story of Jesus' transfiguration. He takes the inner circle of disciples up a mountain where he enters into prayer. In the gospel stories, whenever Jesus prays, it is a signal that something important is about to happen. This is true for us, too. When we enter into prayer, quieting our hearts and minds so that we can listen to God, to Jesus, we are poised to become instruments of something God wants to do through us.

As he prays, Jesus' appearance changes. He glows with a kind of divine aura. It is the glow of his relationship with God. We have that "glow" also, whenever we give attention to our relationship with God through the practice of what we call the inward journey. It is simply coming back to our true selves in God through prayer, reflection, study, simply being still and knowing that God is God. It is the "glow" that comes from discovering, or rediscovering, ourselves as persons loved and called by God, with gifts to offer the world, including the gift of our own unique life. I think when Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, told people to let their light shine in the world and not to hide it under a bushel basket, this is what he meant -- our relationship with God and living our lives out of that relationship.

The disciples are very drowsy but awake enough to see what is going on. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus about his journey toward Jerusalem. This is a kind of confirmation of Jesus and his mission by the Law and the Prophets of Israel. They are discussing 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. He is a lot like us. When there is something going on of a deeper spiritual nature, when we experience something that reveals the sacred dimension of life, we sometimes just can't keep quiet! We think we always have to say something. 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, four centuries before Jesus, puts it bluntly: Those who know don't talk; those who talk don't know. Cultivating silent awareness is the most basic practice of the spiritual life.

Peter is nervous and chatty. His mind is jumping around, so he has this great idea. Let's make this experience permanent. Let's build three tents or booths and just stay here and enjoy this moment forever. When we have some kind of profound spiritual experience or awareness, 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 the cultivation and enshrining of religious experiences. Faith for Jesus is about our living from moment to moment with an awareness of our relationship with God. It is about paying attention to God's presence and leading and speaking.

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. It is God beyond our images, words, ideas, and thoughts. Peter and the others are finally reduced to awed 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 Mark as well, we see that the disciples have not been getting it. They aren't really listening to and hearing what Jesus is talking about. They have their own fixed 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. 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 who Jesus is and what he is about. After Jesus' suffering, death, and

resurrection, the real meaning of his life can be better understood. But even then, it is so easy to stop listening 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.

Evidence of our not listening to Jesus is everywhere today. 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 grow up around a gospel of economic prosperity, telling people that Jesus' message is about their becoming rich and successful and care-free. Christian fundamentalism, like fundamentalism in other religions, organizes itself around a few dogmatic truths and seeks to gain power and influence and control over others. Christianity becomes 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). Christianity today, in large part, is still not listening to Jesus who teaches and embodies nonviolence and love of enemies, and who regarded the world as the sacred creation of God. The Jesus of the poor, the rejected, the suffering is almost completely ignored. The Jesus of humility, self-giving, and non-violence is rejected. Too often the church has presented Christian faith as about obeying laws and being morally righteous 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 lives that are rooted in listening to Jesus. Christian spirituality is not just about doing good things or holding right beliefs. It is about how we live, about our relationship with the living God who is always speaking to us, if only we would listen and follow.

Scene two: Jesus and the disciples have come down from the mountain. 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. Conditions like epilepsy were attributed to demon possession. The man asked the disciples to cast out this demon, but they "did not have enough power to do it" (this is the literal meaning of the Greek here). Jesus' response is rather surprising. He launches into a 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? Jesus' "meltdown" must have some significance. Let's take him at his words. He is fed up with faithlessness. "Perversity" 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. He believed that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. He believed that we have it within us to live as God created us to live. He said, The kingdom of God is within you! (Luke 17:21) However, 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. The Bible itself never means faith in that sense. Faith is about living out of our relationship with God and others and ourselves, a relationship defined as love. Faith is about a way of living, not about stuff in our heads. Jesus is frustrated with the disciples and others, including this man seeking his help. Jesus healed many people, but not everyone. He performed powerful acts that stirred people up and got them excited. But that was not what he was really about. He wanted people to live the life they were created to live, life in relation to God and others and the world as God's beloved creation, a life characterized by love and kindness, compassion and justice. But people kept flocking to him so that he would amaze them or cure them, or otherwise get something out of him. And no one seemed to be listening as he called them into the life of God's kingdom, God's reign over the life of the world. People just did not seem to be getting it, that they have it within them to be channels of God's love and power and spirit.

Well, Jesus casts out the demon. The boy is released from its grip. The people are amazed. And that is where our reading for today ends. There does not seem to be any great joy in it. As the text goes on, it says that, while the people were amazed at Jesus' act of healing, he says once again that the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands. And still, no one understands.

After we have heard these stories, we are left more in wonder than with answers. Am I listening to Jesus? What changes in my life do I need to make so that I can listen more closely, pay more attention to my life in God, to what it means for me to follow Jesus? Am I still looking for miracles or powerful religious

experiences, rather than practicing the quieting of my mind and heart and life so that I can listen, so that I can become more aware of my life in relation to God and the world as God's creation? If I were to really begin to listen to Jesus, and within Jesus' teachings and life, God's voice in my life, what would need to change? What might God be calling me to do and to be?

The season of Lent begins this week. 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. This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him! I pray for all of us a Lenten season of listening hearts and minds, and lives coming alive in our relationship with God.