

“Listen!”

A sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant (Lynchburg, VA)

Luke 10:38-42 (the story of Mary and Martha)

Many of us growing up heard the saying, “God gave you two ears and only one mouth for a reason.” The implication is clear: *We are to listen twice as much as we speak.* Looking at this very text where Mary and Martha are often characterized as two opposing forces in the universe, the innate desire to serve others and the innate desire to serve God – at least this is how many in the theological realm describe them. Thomas Keating in his book “Reawakenings” said of this very story, *“Mary of Bethany sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his discourse is a paradigm of the first stirrings of contemplation. As she sat listening to his words, a kind of blurring of the conceptual level took place that carried her far beyond Martha’s busy world of tasks and obligations. This blurring was the result of her attraction to go beyond words to the Word –beyond the details of his humanity to the person who was speaking – and to enter into union with that person.”* Keating expertly of course uses the story as an example of bridging between the physical world to the spiritual world, and that Mary was crossing that bridge while Martha was not, and I don’t disagree with his analysis. However, I would like to propose a slight amplification of a very real truth in the narrative: *Mary was listening to another, while Martha was not.*

Jan Linn, a good friend of this community, in his book “The Jesus Connection,” does an insightful job of pulling together the premise of listening to another. He first couches this notion in the idea of being fully present with another. However, even that foundation has its beginnings within our own understanding of mutual presence in regards to the human and the divine. He asserts that God is always present. Jan says, *“It is interesting that we so often pray for Jesus to be present when the gospel declares that he is forever with us. The heart of our faith is the presence of God. God declares the cries of a suffering people enslaved in Egypt have been heard, and God determines to deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8); God promises to be with Moses when he returns to lead the people out of Egypt (Exodus 3:12); God promises to be with Joshua when Moses dies (Joshua 1:5); Jesus’ very birth is called “Emmanuel” (Matthew 1:23); and Paul declares that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39)”* (p. 27). Needless to say, God’s presence is a permanent fixture in our lives; there’s no escaping it (which I wouldn’t think is a bad thing!). Now, whether or not we are present with God, or even present with one another—that is another matter entirely. Jan notes this when he says, *“One of the most reliable indicators of spiritual growth is when our desire to listen exceeds our need to speak. This includes talking to another person and talking to God”* (p. 29). No matter how you slice it, “listening” is the key.

In our faith community, it is not unusual that when another speaks, we remain silent. We don’t necessarily voice frequent affirmations or “amen” or even “uh-huh.” We often remain silent, typically with the purpose of truly listening to the person, giving them space to articulate and express their thoughts, bear their heart, unhindered. We listen silently out of respect. Equally so, we use silent contemplation as a channel to hear God—to remove the clutter of our minds and hearts, settle our spirits to be attuned to God’s.

Listening to one another is the key. So, I will pause now, and I would like to invite us to listen. We will take a page from our Quaker Friends' handbook, and sit quietly, listening first for God, then in the silence if the Spirit prompts you to share something, please do. It can be something from your heart, a story, a scripture, a poem, anything you are moved to share, and we will listen... and then I will after a few minutes close us in prayer.

Shalom