

Guest speaker John Eaton presented this sermon on Sunday, 24 July 2005 in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. It is based on Luke 21:5-18.

Can We Listen?

A FEW WEEKS AGO I discovered that Linda and I have something in common with a fellow member. On Sunday mornings we all listen to a worship service from St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Boston.

This past fall, the Dean of the Cathedral announced a preaching festival. Members of the radio congregation were encouraged to submit a meditation on evangelism based on the text from Luke that we heard this morning. The Cathedral staff would then select a sermon to be read on the radio.

The bad news is that my submission was not chosen. Linda told me that it was not "Episcopal" enough. The good news, of course, is that you are gracious enough to listen to it.

II

During the 2004 political campaign for president I felt literally swamped with words. The words were all intended to convert "the undecided" to vote either Democratic or Republican. One politician after another attempted to convince the national "congregation" that his or her party knew what was best for this Republic.

One could say that the political campaigns seemed almost evangelistic in their fervor. The campaigns sought to win converts. Politicians spent their time categorizing people as living in "red" or "blue" states. In that time of political unrest not much time was spent on listening.

Evangelism is usually defined as preaching the gospel. So perhaps it is unfair to compare political speech with spreading the word of Christ.

But the campaigns did remind me of the power of words and the ideology – the theology – that lies behind any words, to unite and welcome or to divide and exclude.

In an age of international terrorism and with our nation at war, America and the world do need to hear the story of Jesus. But how to do this? What kind of evangelism, what kind of words, what message?

Evangelism could be a blind and deaf proselytizing of Christianity. Evangelism could imagine people as living in "red" and "blue" states,

or countries, as being either “red” or “blue.” But can there be a kind of evangelism that does not categorize people as believer and non-believer? Perhaps one way to do that is to focus not on what to say but on listening.

Listening – with our eyes and ears – to the life, the experiences, the suffering, the endurance and the faith of the friend as well as the stranger. Listening to these people no matter where they live, or how the vote or how they pray.

And perhaps, in that listening, we will hear the word of God. Perhaps in our listening we will be heard by God.

III

In this morning’s passage from Luke, Jesus makes a promise to his disciples. Jesus promises that in the midst of war, destruction and persecution, “I will give you words and wisdom...” This is the promise of the living Christ to be with us no matter what happens. The “giving” of words and wisdom is, of course, a metaphor for the promise of Jesus being with us in the dark as well as in the joyous times of our lives.

To make a small confession – and that is probably too strong a word – I am something of a “Doubting Thomas.” I don’t know about you but I struggle with my faith when faced with this kind of promise. This promise of the gift of words and wisdom.

In the dark times of my life it has certainly been hard for me to believe this promise – “I will give you words and wisdom.” – a promise that can seem almost magical.

When I lost my brother, or faced my son’s chronic illness, the presence of God did not seem so very real to me.

In the most difficult moments of my life – when my faith was put on the back burner – I have struggled how to understand and how to endure the difficult things that do happen to us: war, destruction of relationships, illness, death.

What helped to bring me back to my faith was experiencing the help and concern, the love, if you will, from friends and strangers that was shown by their listening and seeing my need.

So how do we “hear” or experience this word from God? Perhaps for some the word we listen for and the wisdom we discover is found in nature, in music, art, in novels as well as in Holy Scripture and from prayer.

My focus for today is that these promised words and this wisdom can be found and experienced by listening to others as well as by being listened to. It may be found by opening ourselves to the Holy – the Sacred – that is around us and within us.

If our evangelism is to share – to communicate – the Good News that we have experienced then I think it does need to be based on that listening.

Listening that can lead to understanding. And understanding that may lead to the words of wisdom that we need to be able to respond to friends and strangers.

Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest. In his book, Reaching Out, he talks about a creating a space for listening to the world when he wrote the following: “hospitality ...means the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.”

It might just be possible that we can minister to one another, that we can create that free space and that we can evangelize, better through listening than we are able to by using words.

Listening to and then responding to the needs of strangers and friends, however, is certainly easier said than done. I know it is easy for me to converse about the healing nature of the Pilates exercise system, or the peace obtained from practicing Tai Chi.

It is not so easy to decide how to respond to the more personal side of life that I sometimes notice. I am surprised by how often I overlook the seemingly small opportunities to hear and understand what another person is saying or asking for.

I have belonged to a health club for about five years. Perhaps it is my reserved nature but it seems that it has taken me a very long time to begin to listen to the human stories that I hear unfolding all around me every day at that gym; stories of loneliness and laughter, endurance and joy, illness and miracles as well as the common concerns about children and grandchildren.

Most of us have a reluctance to intrude in the personal affairs of others. And that is probably a good thing. But for most of us evangelism will come down to how we choose to respond when we allow ourselves to hear and see those stories.

IV

The Christian church offers a place where we can learn, where we can practice, as a community and as individuals, to listen to God, and others, through prayer, music, sermons and, I suppose, sometimes even at the coffee hour. What helps me is to hear over and over again that

God is creating me, that God loves me, and will give me words to speak if I but listen.

I need to be reminded that it is “spreading the word of Christ” to listen with my eyes and ears.

It has often seemed to me that our church is a place where relationships are formed and where memories are made, and then kept in our hearts.

For example, I suspect that what we are really doing with our children in Sunday School is creating memories of a place where they are loved and cared for more than we are teaching facts.

Some twenty years after one of my children experienced an emotional breakdown, I am still supported by, in awe really, of the assistance- the kindnesses of the people in this church who listened.

Peter Gomes is the chaplain at Harvard University. Listen to how he thinks we can spread the word of Christ: “The gospel of Jesus Christ comes down to a rather simple proposition for ordinary people like you and me: If God is to be known, that knowledge will be in the lives of the ordinary people who are redeemed by his extraordinary message of love. What the world knows of Jesus it will know through us; for better or worse we are the good news, the gospel, the light of the world. The work of God awaits our hands, the love of God awaits our hearts, and the people of God await our fellowship here and now, ordinary and imperfect though we may be.”

V

This morning’s passage from Luke ends as it began. We hear a promise. Jesus says, “By your endurance you will gain your souls.” Who knows what that means? I certainly don’t.

But when I am very still I do believe that there is a place within me – perhaps my soul – that belongs to God or may be a part of God.

Frederick Buechner, in his book, Telling Secrets, says it this way. “I have come to believe more and more that God also speaks through the fathomless quiet of the holy place within us all.

I believe that this quiet and holy place in us is God’s place and that it is what marks us as God’s.”

And so we hear those words and wisdom not just by listening to others, and not just by being listened to, but also by listening to the quiet small voice within us.

I believe that this Quiet Place is strengthened as we listen to God, through prayer. This Quiet Place is strengthened as we learn to attend to the love of God that is around us even in the midst of all our doubts.

I wonder if our evangelism could mean sharing with others that this church community helps us find the Quiet Place within us. That this is a community of seekers who will listen and share with you their search for the God who gives us words and wisdom.

VI

The former speaker of the U.S House of Representatives, Tip O'Neil, told us "all politics is local." So is being a Christian and so is evangelism. The challenge of evangelism is to find a way to speak, in our listening and in our words and in our lives, of a common search for the God of love.

This personal evangelism will only be successful if it is based on an understanding that there is a God who transcends all of our religious traditions. No person or religion can demand that the "undecided" vote their way or join their team.

The words we share with friends and strangers may or may not include speaking of the Infinite Source of Love, the healing power of Jesus or gaining our souls.

In the final analysis, evangelism is about living and listening, in a manner that reflects a belief – and a hope – in the saving Power of Love and Jesus Christ.

Let us join together in prayer:

Holy and Living Presence, we seek the Quiet Place within us. May your words and wisdom be a lamp unto our feet! Precious Jesus, may our light so shine that all the world will learn of you.

Fill our minds with an acceptance of all people and create within us space for the stranger to become our friend.

Fill our hearts, dear God, with the strength and will to spread the good news by listening to others.

Fill our souls with your love and grant us memories that will enable us to endure.

Fill us with the peace that passes all understanding. We pray in the name of Jesus whom we dare to call the Christ.

Amen.