

March 16, 2014

Lent: A Season of Caring

## **Caring Enough...to Listen**

Luke 9:28-36 and Job 2:11-13

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In our sermons through the season of Lent (which this year we're calling "A Season of Caring"), we're thinking in particular about different ways in which we can care for each other; ways in which we can show the love of Christ to one another. There are two great commandments that Jesus leaves with his disciples: we are first to love God, and then to love our neighbor. And, says Jesus, "by this all people will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:35): not because you shout and scream about me but because you love me and you love each other. When people see that we love one another they'll turn their attention to the source of that love. So we're thinking together about love and its practical application in our lives and through our lives, touching the lives of others in our congregation and beyond, especially in time of stress or distress or sadness.

Next week, for example, we'll be thinking about the offering of prayer in time of confusion where we need guidance in our lives. And last week, we focused on taking decisive action when something just needs to be done by someone: remember the story in Mark 2 where four friends bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus. I mean somebody had to do something! And these friends were willing to do anything to bring their friend into the presence of Jesus. Even when the doors to the house where Jesus was were filled with people, and they couldn't get in, they didn't give up, but made their way in through the roof! They did what they needed to do.

Today as we continue to think about loving and caring in practical ways, I want us to think together about the act, the loving act, the caring act, of listening. Listening: an act that is more powerful than we often think or realize. An act whose power we often see only when listening is not there, when it's gone, when it's missing, when somebody doesn't listen to us. It's then we that we realize how important it is to us, how critical it is to us, and how transformative it is within our lives – when it's gone; when there's silence, the wrong kind of silence, and nobody is there for us at all. Joyce Landorf Heatherly, in her book *Irregular People*, tells the following story. She writes:

A woman in her early 30s discovered a lump in her breast. When all the medical tests were completed the results showed that she had a malignancy. A radical mastectomy was scheduled for the next week. She knew she'd never been able to talk with her mother. But because of the seriousness of the surgery she felt that for once her

mother would have to listen. She called and made a luncheon date. Cautiously, as she drove her mother home from lunch the daughter began, “I have a lump. . . All the tests show . . . Next week a mastectomy. . .” After a few moments of electric silence and no reaction whatsoever from her mother, the woman bluntly asked if she had heard what was said. The mother nodded her head affirmatively, and, as if her daughter had merely read off the charges on her phone bill, calmly dismissed the whole subject. Then with animation she said, “you know your sister has the best enchilada recipe? I’ll have to give it to you.” The daughter pulled the car over and with mounting frustration yelled, “Mother, I just told you I have cancer. I may die. I’m scared to death of the surgery. Why don’t you hear me?” Then with an unearthly detachment from reality the mother calmly responded, “You need to know also that if you leave the enchiladas in the oven too long they dry out and get hard.”

It would be funny if it were not so painful – and true! This one is true. And some of you’ve been in that place where you desperately need somebody to hear you out, and they are there, but they are not there. They’re listening but they’re not listening. They haven’t heard a word you say and it’s painful, it’s hard, it’s powerful in a negative sense “not to be listened to.” True for adults, true also for children.

Clinical psychologist Marie Hartwell-Walker tells a story which I think could be true of many of our families. It certainly reminds me of raising young children. She tells the story of the preschooler she observed in a grocery store doing everything she could to gain her mother’s attention. “She whined, she squirmed in her seat in the cart, she writes, she took items off the shelf, she threw the bread on the floor. Her mom asked her to please stop whining, replaced the pilfered items, picked up the bread and pleaded with her daughter please, please be good and I’ll give you some candy when you leave.” Dr. Hartwell-Walker continues like this: “Children need attention like a plant needs sun and water. They are designed to get adults’ attention. When the adults react with interest affection and approval the children strive to please, to copy the big people, to grow in their social and practical skills and to find a positive place in the family” [DR: and that’s a critical function of listening. It has to do with belonging and of not being alone, a place in the family.] On the other hand, she writes, “fear of abandonment threatens a child’s emotional and physical survival. The truth is the average American child only gets three and a half minutes of uninterrupted individual attention from his or her parents per day – average American child only gets three and a half minutes of uninterrupted individual attention from his or her parents a day.”

And apparently it’s getting worse – aided and abetted by our cell phones and smart phones. There are some studies out there now which indicate that to a child the cell phone or a smart phone is like another sibling in the family, another child in the family, who is more important than all the other children because as soon as this child whines all of the attention goes to it and the real child has lost! Lost. (*Parents – Wired To Distraction Parents*, by Perri Klass, M.D., NY Times, 11 March 2014).

Dr. Hartwell-Walker concludes like this. She says, “when that attention is consistently missing then even being scolded, nagged or punished is far better than being ignored or forgotten.” (Marie Hartwell-Walker, *What To Do About Attention-Seeking Kids* (2011). Retrieved March 27, 2014, from <http://psychcentral.com/lib/what-to-do-about-attention-seeking-kids/>)

It’s true of children; it’s true of adults, true of individuals. I think it’s also true of nations, of peoples who feel as if they’ve never been heard, as if they’re out of the family, as if they don’t belong. And the sense of disassociation with others rises up in them until sometimes something terrible happens as a response to not being heard, not being listened to. It’s powerful in a negative sense.

Fortunately it’s also powerful in a positive sense: when we are heard, when we are listened to, and when we know we’ve been heard and when we know that we have been listened to. When somebody has really listened, the sense of release and relief and belonging can be simply enormous. Even though a word is not spoken, the sense of connection can be vital for our lives.

Some of you may have read last week’s Washington Post Magazine (March 6, 2014). It included a delightful article by journalist Rachel Manteuffel on the work of David Kessler. David Kessler was the longest serving zookeeper at our Washington Zoo. He’d worked there for 39 years and he retired in January. And she interviewed him, and asked “what was the most significant event that occurred while you were there?” And Kessler said he was most proud of his work with William the gibbon (a gibbon is an ape), back in 1978. Miss Manteuffel tells the story like this:

William was a juvenile gibbon living with his parents when he got stuck in the enclosure and broke his arm. He was in the hospital so long in the company of humans that his parents rejected him when he got back. And because his hospital experience was scary and painful, people now made William fearful and angry as well. So he was kept out of the exhibit for a while off by himself. Each day she writes David Kessler would sit in William’s enclosure doing nothing except being non-threatening. [DR: Listening.] No mask, no gloves. William would stay in the furthest corner from Kessler swinging limb from limb, elaborately ignoring the 130 pound human in the room. Over the course of a week William came closer and closer until his feet would brush his keeper’s head as he swung by. Eventually he began to put his head on Kessler’s sweatshirt and go to sleep. Sometimes even with his arms wrapped around Kessler’s head.

No words, just listening, listening. It worked with an ape. William’s life was transformed. If it worked with an ape . . . I am tempted to say it should work with us but I’m not going to say that! . . . It worked with me. If it worked with an ape it worked with me. I’ve experienced this; perhaps not the “swinging around” part, but in a different way. Midlife crisis for me was not pleasant. Not pleasant inside, not pleasant for me to be around other people or for them to experience me. It was a time of real confusion. I was miserable, and I probably made other people miserable as well. Forty years into life, 20 years of marriage, 15 years as a minister, 10

years of parenthood – and all of these strands in life had come together and they were wrapped up with each other, tied together in a knot, in a ball which I couldn't pull apart, and which seemed to be tying my life in knots. I couldn't unravel it and I couldn't control it.

And then one day I met Bob. Out of the blue I met Bob. I was at a meeting. I was actually at a Presbytery meeting and I stepped outside and Bob happened to be outside; I think, by divine providence he happened to be outside. I knew Bob just a little bit but not much. He was an ordained minister and a professional therapist. And I began talking. And as I began talking, he turned to me when he realized that I wasn't just saying "Hey everything's good, everything's fine, everything's normal" – he turned to me and said words which I will never forget. So simple, he said, "Do you want to talk?" Do you want to talk?! And I said "Oh yes, do I ever just want to talk!" And so we set up times over the next two to three months. Ten hours we spoke. Actually we didn't speak. It was I who spoke. Bob hardly said a word in ten hours. He asked a question once in a while. He clarified what I said once in a while. He redirected the conversation once in a while. He was an "active listener": if I was heading down one thread and he thought it was time to talk about another he redirected the conversation. But not once in that time did he try to fix me. He listened attentively, actively to what I said. And as he listened a miracle began to take place. It was like magic. I have no clue how it happened. The knots began to unravel. The threads began to make more sense and what I saw was that while each thread was "just right" (or not far from being "right") yet, the way that they were interacting was "just wrong!" And as he teased them apart through the listening, the peace returned. The peace returned.

About ten years later I was at another meeting, with another group of Presbyterian ministers. This was well over a thousand miles away from where I had known Bob, and I realized that the person who was speaking probably knew him. I asked him if he did, and the conversation began. He indeed knew Bob, quite well, and then asked a question: "Did you know that Bob had died?" I hadn't known. But when I heard the news something happened at that moment which rarely happens to me. Part of my job and joy is to help people in time of death, and to hold it together at such moments. But at that moment the dam burst, and I spontaneously began to cry, realizing that this man who had just died had in some senses *saved my life and saved my marriage and saved my family and perhaps my ministry as well* – by doing nothing but listening, at that moment when I desperately needed to be with somebody who would hear me out.

In the book of Job where Job is facing absolute devastation; his children all gone, his body in a mess, his heart torn apart, as he's facing all of these things his friends come by. Jobs' comforters come by and they do really, really well listening to him in three verses in Chapter 2 of the book of Job.

When Job's three friends heard all these troubles that had come upon him they set out from their home Eliphaz, Bildad and Zofar. They met together to go and console and comfort him. They brought their community around him. When they saw him from a distance they did not recognize him. They raised their voices and wept aloud. They

tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights and no one spoke a word to him, just listened. For they saw that his suffering was very great.

They did really well – until the end of Chapter 2. You know how many chapters there are in the Book of Job? There are 42 Chapters. Two Chapters are good, the rest is bad! Their listening ends. They use all their reasoning, all their theology, everything that they have learned to try to explain to Job what's going on and why it's going on. But none of it makes any sense. Not at that moment.

Now let's be clear: there is a time for a really good theological discussion. There's a time to provide really clear instruction and advice, direct guidance to open the door to the future for someone who is stuck in some way. Sometimes action, verbal action, is clearly needed. BUT, it's a matter of timing and relationship: *at that moment*, all that those friends needed to do was to be there and listen. And they chose the wrong path: with great truths, often correct theologically, flowing from their mouths, they chose the wrong path.

It's hard to listen. Really hard. Especially for those of us who are Type A people. We've been trained to solve problems. We have been trained to express our point of view, to enter into a discussion which goes back and forth; discussions through which things will happen because of what we know and what we have learned. We're experts. We're in control. But there's something about listening which calls us to temporarily lay aside all of our expertise, and to take the role of a person who is no longer in control. When we take the role of a listener, we don't know what's going to happen next! And at times it can be hard for many of us to see it as powerful, as really powerful. But it is. It seems as if we're doing nothing when in fact we're doing something of enormous importance.

For example, listening is not only critical when we show love to one another. It's a critical part of our faith in God made known in Jesus Christ as well. Listening is an essential component of Christian faith, our relationship to God. Every single day we should be developing the discipline and practice of listening to God: reading God's word in scripture and saying "Lord speak. Let me listen." And if listening to God's word in the book of nature saying, "Lord help me hear what you have to say. Give me ears to listen." Listening is fundamental to our faith.

Remember our scripture reading in the 9th Chapter of Luke's gospel? Jesus goes up a mountain with three of his closest disciples. They have seen Jesus in his humiliation – as a normal everyday person: Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, with them day by day. To be sure, they know he's special, but they've never seen him really in his "full glory." But there on the mountain the trappings of his humility go, and they see him as the Son of God shining bright in all his glory. And then a voice comes from Heaven and says "This is my Son, my chosen one, my beloved one," and (as if to say "if you believe this do something") the voice goes on. It doesn't say "If you believe he's the Son of God then profess it boldly to others!" (though that can be a good thing).

The voice doesn't say "Believe it strongly in your heart every day" (though who could object to that!). Rather, what the voice says is this: *this is my Son, my chosen, my beloved, LISTEN TO HIM!* If you believe this, listen! Listen to him, listen to him. That's the sign that we really believe who he is: that we listen.

And if we listen to God as a practice every day and if we understand that this is powerful and critical, perhaps God would help us to listen better to our friends and our neighbors? Indeed, there is no question that as we listen to God we'll come across a truly stunning truth: that God, the God we listen to, listens to us. How amazing is that? Isn't that the biggest miracle of all? That the God of the universe should hear you and me, stooping down to listen to us? If this is who God is, when we listen to God how can we not make it a practice to listen to one another?

Let me close with a story, another story about listening, the power of saying nothing. This is by Bob Williams a Methodist pastor and a hospital chaplain (*Perspectives*, pp. 20-22, November 1999). The story takes place when he's 25 years of age, once again a true story. He calls it, *Beloved Nathalie*. He writes this is the story of Nathalie.

She was 63 when I met her. I was 25 and an intern at a Massachusetts psychiatric hospital. Nathalie spent her waking hours sitting on a bench in a large heavily populated ward. She'd been there for many, many months. She spent her time in a fetal position on the end of the bench, feet on the bench, knees pulled up to her chest, arms clasped about her legs and eyes closed. Nathalie sat there gently rocking endlessly back and forth. I saw her on the bench as I passed through the ward on my second day. I asked about her at a staff meeting and learned about her background – a story of personal deprivation, loneliness, brutality and horror. I asked if I might spend an hour a day with Nathalie.

The staff hesitated but then they finally said why not we've nothing to lose. So Nathalie and I began our affair.

The next day I walked into a noisy ward and crossed over to the bench. Sitting on the opposite end from Nathalie I assumed her exact position for one hour. All of the patients looked at me and seemed relieved that at last there was somebody there crazier than they were.

For two weeks I did this. Nathalie never moved. My attempt to identify with her did not appear to be working but I was stubborn and determined to stay with her no matter what.

On Monday of the third week there was a change. Nathalie was still facing away from me but now she'd moved out of her fetal position and put her feet on the floor.

The third week passed and then the fourth, no change.

On Monday of the fifth week there was a second change. Nathalie had moved her body 90 degrees to the left and was now sitting on the bench the way a ball player might, head still down.

Week six passed with no change except one. She watched me as I entered.

On Monday of the seventh week she was at the end of the bench but astride it as on a saddle and looking straight at me. For one hour we looked at each other.

On Monday of the eighth week Nathalie had moved several feet toward the middle of the bench. I did likewise.

In the middle of the tenth week she was sitting in the middle of the bench. I too moved to the middle, being close but making no contact.

On Monday of the 11th week Nathalie said 'Hi.' I said 'Hi Nathalie I'm Chaplain Williams.' She said to my amazement, 'I know it and your first name is Bob.'

On Tuesday she took my hand, held it for about ten seconds and then flung it down. She repeated this each day.

On Tuesday of the 12th week I began to experience grief because it was my last week there. I was just an intern and my time was almost up. I told her that. She looked at me, took my hand and stood up and hand in hand we walked through a ward that suddenly had become stone silent. Very slowly but rhythmically someone started to clap. Others followed and finally everyone was standing and clapping in perfect rhythm. We went through a door still holding hands, down some stairs, through an exit door into one of the heaviest downpours of rain I've ever experienced. I guess I was glad it was raining because I was crying and I knew Nathalie was.

Nathalie started to skip and pulled me with her until we reached the middle of the campus where breathless we sat down holding hands. We were drenched but it really didn't matter. How long we sat there I'm not sure but then she got up, dropped my hands and ran toward her building. She stopped just before entering, turned in my direction, it was still pouring, and for the first time I saw her smile. She waved and disappeared.'

Doing nothing. Nothing? Well, a powerful nothing! Listening, being present with, can be life-giving, transformative, doing what God does for you and me every day, every day: "Lord, we cry, hear my prayer! And, miracle of miracles, God does! And calls us *to do* the same, and *to be* the same, listeners, with one another.

Let us pray. Holy God thank you for your listening ear and for those in our lives who listen to us. May we be that same person for others. Amen.

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