

*May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

OPENING:

STORY #1: The story goes that a pastor was planning a wedding for a couple. The couple came into the pastor's office and as they were going over all the details for the service, the couple to be married said: "Now we want to be sure and include that love chapter -- that 'crazy little thing called love' that Paul talks about." The pastor was ready for this. He tried to explain to them, "You know that's a beautiful passage but it actually wasn't written for a wedding. That was written for a group of people, the Corinthians, who came together and they cared about each other, but pretty soon it was clear that some of them thought they had better ideas than some of the other people. And some of them began to have voices that got a little louder than some of the others, and pretty soon they were saying to one another, 'Well, we're all equal. It's just that some of us are more equal than others.'"

And at that point the couple looked at the pastor and said:

"Yes! Yes, that's exactly the passage we need read at our wedding."¹

LISTENING:

That story, like the passage of Paul's from Corinthians, concerns what we hear versus what is said. How we speak and how we listen to one another.

In fact, all of the passages that we have heard today, deal with that, in addition to how we understand God when God speaks to us.

In our Gospel reading, the people in Nazareth could not listen, could not bear to hear, Jesus' first sermon, they ran him out on a rail, on the first opportunity. In the Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah struggled with listening to God, to the point that God had to put his hand on Jeremiah's mouth, to get him to stop talking and believe in himself.

And then Paul's masterful words, which we indeed so often hear at weddings....

¹ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/cultivating-attentiveness>

The Corinthians won't listen to them, as they will fall on deaf ears in Corinth, which will require a Second Letter to the Corinthians, which will be as bitter in its tone as ours today is beautiful.

1st CORINTHIANS 13

Now I am right there with the wedding couple from the story. This reading was read at Michelle and I's wedding and probably many of yours. Along with the Sermon on the Mount, it's probably one of the most recognizable passages in Scripture.

Paul is simply on a roll when he is writing it.

Paul goes "All in" with all the tricks and strategies from Greek rhetoric: alliteration, assonance, anaphora, repetition, etc. Paul uses the word "Love" as the subject of 16 straight verbs in our reading. Then he closes it out with a remarkably succinct conclusion at the end: "The greatest of these is love." Hard to go wrong there.

This is a master at work at his craft, Shakespeare at the turn of the 17th century, Picasso in the 20th, or indeed Tom Brady, in the 21st.

So it's no surprise that we use it at weddings, despite the fact that the context is wrong. It's just that good.

STILL LISTENING:

But the irony is that we need to be listening, that one of the lessons of the passage is that we *shouldn't* be listening to the noisy gongs or the clanging cymbals, or the proliferation of tongues and voices. It's our desire to boast, even our gifts at prophecies and knowledge, that confuse and obscure and drown out what Paul, and what God, are trying to tell us.

Because if we really are honest, we would admit that love, love in a marriage, love in any relationship, does all the things that Paul says it should *not* do. Our love is impatient, our love boasts and is arrogant and rude. Our inability to love breaks each other's heart.

So what we hear sometimes from Paul's passage might be summed as: "Love is good, or Love is the best."—which again is not the worst in the world to hear.

But what I think we are called to hear, and what Paul is trying to say: “Love is hard, love is work, love is hard work. ‘Speaking truth in love’² is hard work. Listening to the truth in love, can be the hardest work.”

Paul, himself, might not be the best role model, he seems to never stop talking, never stop writing letters, never stop travelling and engaging others in argument. So we need to find a better model, a “more excellent way.”

STORY #2:

There was once a Sunday school teacher who did “an awful lot of listening to a group of (students/ young people) who did an awful lot of talking.”

On one particular Sunday, the class was reading through the old King James Version of the Bible that they had in the Sunday school class, the red-letter edition where it was marked clearly what words Jesus had to say.

At some point, one of the students in the class raised his hand and asked the teacher, “why is it, if Jesus is so important, that there really aren’t that many red letters in this Bible?”

A hush went over the classroom. All the students thought to themselves, this guy has got a good point. Yeah. It’s our side, 1; the Sunday school teacher, 0.

And the teacher had a bit of a pause, as she sometimes did, and then she said, “Well, I guess it’s probably because Jesus listened a lot more than he talked.”³

In a world that is consumed with the competition of voices and sounds. In a political climate of shouting and interruptions. In our homes and families, where we too often speak, or just wait out the other person from speaking, rather than just listen.

We are reminded, that in our faith journeys, that in our path of discipleship, that in our walk to follow Christ. That we can follow him by that act of listening. And that again does not entail simply closing our mouths and doing nothing, but honest and open listening.

² Ephesians 4.15

³ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/cultivating-attentiveness>

CONCLUSION

I would like to offer up a few images in how we do that, with the admission that I am not the best at any of these:

1) The first comes from what we do every Sunday. Historically, because of technology and low literacy rates, the Church was a gathering place to hear Scripture orally. To listen together, to engage in that task as a collective. We still do that today, not because, for most of us, we can't read, or because the Bible is not available to us in myriad ways, but because it's important to come together and be silent, and to listen, together. Ultimately, the Church "silences itself to hear something" and is "defined in some way by (that act of) listening."⁴

2) Second, Thomas Keating, the late Roman Catholic monk who popularized the practice of Centering Prayer used to say that "Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a poor translation."⁵ We rightly associate Epiphany with a bright light but sometimes we see only through a mirror dimly and we have to listen. God then breaks through with that "still small voice" or that "sigh too deep for words."⁶ Then, we must listen for God and to each other and we are able to grow in Christ and our ability to love.

3) Like Paul, I keep talking, even as the point that I am trying to make is that our witness to God doesn't need to be a verbal testimony. Our witness can merely be watching and waiting and listening.

I'll close then as I began by repeating an expanded portion of Psalm 19

*They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.*

*Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

*May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

AMEN.

⁴ Williams, Rowan. 2017. 'Holy Living': the Christian Tradition for Today. London: Bloomsbury. 30/31/32.

⁵ [Boston Globe Obituary](#)

⁶ 1 Kings 19.11-13; Romans 8.26