

Series: *Faith that Makes a Difference*

“Faith that Listens”

Introduction: In the calendar that is the church year, we have now entered what is called “Ordinary Time.” From Advent through Pentecost, generally December into sometime in May, we were in what we could call “Extraordinary Time” (though that’s not an official designation; merely my own!). During extraordinary time we follow the long and grand arc of God’s redeeming action in his Son Jesus, beginning with his birth, and running on through his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit. Now, in ordinary time, we seek to absorb, assimilate, and apply this work of Jesus into our own lives, into our own stories. How is his story to shape our daily living? As I noted at our communion gathering last Wednesday evening, the first major event of our lives to come at us in ordinary time this year is the horror and challenge of racism that still tragically exists in our nation. We want to ask: What does the story of Jesus have to say about that?!

To help us, we began looking last week at the letter that James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and the half-brother of Jesus, penned to those who were facing various trials in life, from persecution for their faith, to the poverty that resulted from losing their homes and jobs. James wanted their faith, and he wants our faith, to make a difference in the world, to change the world for the better in the present, even as we await the new creation that God ultimately has in store for us. What I want to impress upon us today is that such change requires that we engage in what we might call a triangle of listening: We must listen to ourselves, listen to God, and listen to our neighbor. All three sides of this triangle are needed if listening is to build change. [READ 1:9-21]

I. Listening to Ourselves

A. Starting with ourselves may seem like a strange, self-centered place to begin, but it’s a call, really, to become more self-aware. For, unless and until we can identify the places we are tempted to put our trust, and the places we can tend to go to find satisfaction, we won’t really be able to see how God meets us in a healing way. James wants to ensure that the trials we face lead us into perseverance and maturity and life, not temptation and sin and death. James helps us think about listening to ourselves by identifying a temptation that all of us face; it is the temptation to put our trust in money. In vv. 9-11, he identifies believers who are both poor, and rich. The poor want more money; the rich have a lot of it. By wanting it badly, both are in danger of putting their trust in it.

B. We can go down this path of trusting in money because it has become so much more than simply a medium of exchange. Three quick thoughts here. One, money has come to function as a measure of value or worth. The more we have of it, the more significant others consider us to be. You’ve heard of a tv show, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.” You’ve probably not heard of the one called, “Lifestyles of the Poor and Unknown,” and that’s because there is no such show! Two, money functions as a measure of security. How many of us began to feel very insecure when the stock market began to plummet last March? What does that say about where we have put our trust? Three, money serves as a measure of control or power. With a lot of it we can buy our way into or out of various situations, and even buy our way over other people. Without it we may very well find ourselves at the mercy of others.

Worth, security, power...the effect of these dynamics is to make money not just helpful; it becomes everything. It becomes our master, both when we don't have it, and when we do.

C. "In God we trust." That's what it says on our ones and fives and tens and twenties and hundreds. But are we really listening to that? Or do we really trust more in the one and the five and the ten and the twenty and the hundred? It is critical that we come to know ourselves so that we can recognize our desires and recognize where we can be prone to temptation, because temptation, as James goes on to say, if we fall into it, will take us no place good. It will drag us toward what will rob us of life, toward sin and death. So if you are poor, James says, "take pride in your high position." Be grateful that you are experiencing circumstances that require you to trust in the Lord because that really is the most solid place you can be. And if you are rich, he writes, "take pride in your humiliation." By which he seems to mean, be grateful that the trials you are experiencing are showing you the limits of what money can do.

My point is that money is just one thing among many that may draw us in a non life-giving direction. How well do we know ourselves? Can we listen to ourselves more carefully and honestly so that we can recognize those voices that draw us away from God and the life he holds out for us? Listening to ourselves is one important side of building change.

II. Listening to God

A. The second direction in which we need to listen, the second side of the triangle, says James, in order to build change in our lives and in our world, is to God. It is by listening to God that we come to know of his great love for us; it is listening to God that our desires then become reordered and directed according to his purposes and out of the love we have received from him. That God is worth listening to is affirmed by James who certifies that this God is the one who generously loves to share his wisdom (1:5), who would not dream of tempting us (1:13), who is the giver of all good gifts and whose character as creator of the universe, the "Father of the heavenly lights," will not change (1:17).

B. This also is the God who, through his word of truth, has given us a new birth so that we can begin to enjoy a new, redeemed life, free from the sin that can so easily entangle us. James here uses an OT sacrificial image associated with worshippers bringing in the firstfruits of their crops as an offering, indicating that the whole crop was really dedicated to the Lord. James says that God has made us a kind of "firstfruits" of all that he has created, meaning that our renewed and restored lives are just the beginning of the larger restoration project that God has in mind that will end with his people receiving the "crown of life" (1:18, 12). To quote the apostle Paul, this God who began a good work in us will bring to completion what he has begun (Phil. 1:6). Such completion will come as we continue to listen to God's word, learn to recognize his voice among the many that can bombard us, and seek to live what we hear. Listening builds change.

III. Listening to Our Neighbor

A. The third and final part that completes the "triangle of listening" is listening to our neighbor. James puts it simply this way: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. . ." (1:19). As Rama teaches on listening in the introduction to her transformational listening course (PAX - TL1), she loves to begin with Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a German theologian and pastor of the last century) in his book, *Life Together*. Placing listening in the context of love, Bonhoeffer writes:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for one another is leaning to listen to them.

In the dictionary, listening is defined as *giving heed or paying attention* to another. This implies that listening to someone means more than simply hearing them. It's possible to hear someone but pay them no attention (mom's in grocery store!). Drawing on Paul's letter to the Galatians (6:2), Rama observes that listening is a part of what it means to carry one another's burdens. As she describes it:

When we listen, we are open to receive the person and to enter their story, to feel their story, to hold their story with them. In the very act of listening, of entering someone's reality, they are experiencing our love, and in the midst of that, the reality of God's love begins to take root.

B. What, then, would it be like to listen to someone "different" from us, different ethnically, socially, spiritually, racially? The panel of north shore pastors that discussed racism a week or so ago offered that one way to move forward in the struggle our nation continues to have with racism is to begin by seeking out people who are different from us, asking them questions, and listening to their stories. Seek to engage them without assumptions about their beliefs, preferences, or life experiences. Apply the kind of graciousness you would hope to receive when misunderstood. Make their joys your joys and their losses your losses.

One way to help tune your heart in that direction is to try and read scripture with their voice, as we did last Wednesday night in our communion service with Psalm 42/43. What would it feel like for a black man or woman or child to pray that psalm and identify with those being oppressed by the enemy of an unfaithful, majority white nation?

As we engage another in this way, listening lovingly to their voice, to their experience, to their story, we can begin to take at least tiny steps toward understanding someone else's reality in a way that can hopefully begin to get rid of the "moral filth and the evil" (v. 21) that racism truly is, and put in its place a building block that can lead to change.

So may the triangle of listening – to ourselves, to God, and to our neighbor – be a way for us to take on more and more of the mind of Jesus. Ultimately, may listening be a vehicle that builds change.

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you **with discomfort**, at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you **with anger**, at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you **with tears**, to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you **with enough foolishness** to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done, to bring justice and kindness to all our children and to the poor.