

Easter 3C
John 21:1-19
The Reverend Bonnie Underwood
April 10, 2016

It All Starts with Listening

On Easter, we heard of the disciples shock and surprise as they struggled to understand the meaning of the empty tomb. Last week we heard about Thomas missing Jesus' first appearance to the disciples, and how he was unable to believe until he saw Jesus for himself, until he was able to personally touch Jesus' wounds. And post-resurrection appearances continue into today's readings, as we hear more about the conversion and the ongoing transformation of those who would lead those early missions to spread the good news to the nations. But whether we're talking about Peter or Saul, soon to be Paul, or even ourselves — conversion and transformation starts with listening.

Listening is hard. I'm sure most of us have heard that old saying that we should spend twice as much time listening as talking — after all we have two ears, and only one mouth! But for many of us, it doesn't come naturally. And even for those of us who believe we do more listening than speaking, we may find that what we really do is spend our time thinking about our responses to what we are hearing, rather than truly listening. Because listening is hard.

Saul didn't start out doing much listening. Saul was very sure of his position, his opinions, and how he should act, before his conversion in Christ remade him into someone new. We even hear him describe his old-self in Philippians:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Saul had it all. He was from the right family, studied the right things, was energetic and zealous, aligned with the powerful of his day, confident in his agenda. It was Saul, who held the garments and supported those stoning Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It was Saul who carried out a campaign of terror in Jerusalem against Jesus' followers. Yet Saul missed the message. He couldn't hear the truth about Jesus. He was doing more talking than listening.

Saul was stopped in his tracks on the road to Damascus, confronted by a light and the resurrected voice of the Lord asking, "Why? Why do you persecute me?" Blinded he spend 3 days in darkness and fasting... a time that must have been filled with feelings of exile and despair, a time when he questioned his life's work and purpose, a time spent in prayer, and self-evaluation.

Like an Old Testament prophet, Paul was called to hear the Lord. He was blinded by the light in order to carry the light and he was redeemed. He was forgiven. Paul was transformed, strengthened for his work to follow the Risen Lord and share the Good News of God in Christ.

It was different with Peter. He had been with Jesus from the beginning. He knew Jesus and he thought he knew all about Jesus' mission. Peter was, after all, one of his closest companions!

But although Peter heard all that Jesus taught, he often missed the point and stumbled. I can really empathize with the humanness of Peter...routinely needing some extra time, plus some 1:1 tutoring, to “get it.”

Peter was the first to declare that Jesus is the Messiah, yet soon after, Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block for failing to understand that Jesus was following God’s path, not a human one, as he traveled to Jerusalem, knowing what would happen there. Peter misunderstands Jesus’ actions in washing the feet of the disciples, fails to listen to what it means to be a servant leader, and instead asks that Jesus washes not only his feet, but also his hands and head. Peter even boasts that he will willingly lay down his life for his Lord, but within hours of that promise, Peter is denying that he even knows Jesus.

Yet in spite of Peter’s failings and his inability to understand, he is loved and God’s love leads to conversion. In John’s Gospel we have an opportunity to witness Peter’s growth into a new kind of intimacy with Jesus, his transformation into a deeper spiritual maturity in Christ. Jesus loves Peter for who he is, giving him the chance to move beyond his denial of Jesus, to affirm his love for the Lord, and Peter receives a great gift — the gift of forgiveness. Peter, like Paul, is redeemed by his loving God, strengthened and transformed for his work to feed and tend to God’s people.

Both of these lessons provide hope for us — hope for new life in Christ, hope for conversion and transformation. For our Lord and Savior knows exactly who he calls to serve, and Jesus calls us as imperfect human beings who can, with God’s help, become aware of who we are in all our imperfections, and respond to God’s great gift of new life with love.

God’s transformation is not about making us different than who we are but about enabling us to more fully participate in God’s work by discovering our authentic selves and living into who God has created us to be, by stretching ourselves to live and serve beyond our comfort zones or expectations.

How is God asking us to be transformed and changed, both as individuals and within our faith community, here at Holy Spirit?

Each week, we get closer to completing our building, providing us with yet undiscovered ways to challenge ourselves to live into our mission of moving beyond these walls and into the community.

It is a paradox that somehow building more space, of finding places for us to do things within these walls, can also encourage us to move outward into the world, to spread Christ’s light and love.

But that is what we are called to do, to strive to live into God’s limitless, unconditional love, by seeking to serve Christ in all persons, by loving our neighbors as ourselves, by striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being. This can mean getting uncomfortable and feeling stretched, acknowledging that our lives do not belong to ourselves alone, to stepping out in faith to follow our Lord and Savior even when we don’t precisely know what God has in mind.

How is God calling us as a community to serve? We'll keep exploring that question in the upcoming week's, and we'll have many chances for us to listen and discern. We'll have a chance to listen as we experience joy in community at our upcoming Kite day, when we prayerfully support our youth as they prepare to travel to Honduras, and we listen to their stories when they return. We can discover how God is calling us to serve as we explore times of silence and contemplation as we visit the Monastery in Conyers, and as we continue to delve into ways to support our local community through work with Mentor Me, Family Promise, and the ministry to the women in Arrendale prison.

Through listening, we can discern our particular gifts and talents, both as a community and within our own lives. By listening, we can open ourselves to conversion through the Spirit. Through listening, we too can be transformed, becoming part of the resurrection story by carrying the light of Christ into the world. Amen.