



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
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Listening As An Act of Love Are We Listening?

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 13:1-17 Let Anyone with ears to hear, listen.

Why is it so hard for us to listen? Or, to bring the point closer to home, why is it so hard for *me* to listen?

Because I'm preoccupied. Example:

"Graham,"—Graham's my fifteen year-old son, he's a sophomore in high school this year—"Graham, why aren't you taking Advanced Biology this year?"

"I will. You have to take regular bio first—it's a prerequisite."

"Graham, *why* aren't you taking Advanced Biology this year?—you know, you can't get into a good college without advanced biology."

"I talked to the guidance counselor: if I do well this year in regular bio, I can take advanced next year."

"The guidance counselor?!?!" What does the guidance counselor know?! If you don't take advanced biology, you can't get into a good college, you know."

"Dad, I'm gonna take it next year."

"Next year?!?! Why next year? Graham, why aren't you taking Advanced Biology **this** year?—you know, you can't get into a good college without advanced biology."

At which point, Graham picks up his headphones—his *noise-cancelling* headphones—and pulls them down—emphatically—over his ears.

Why won't my teenager listen to me? Well, maybe because I don't listen to my teenager.

Of course, what's preoccupying me here—what's preventing me from listening—is my anxiety. My anxiety that, without advanced biology, he won't get into a "good" college, that *then* he won't be able to get a "good" job, that *then* he'll move into my spare bedroom, that *then*, when I'm old and need to move in with him, he won't have bedroom to spare for me.

Sometimes, my anxieties are so hard and fast that I can't even begin to hear—that's the seed that falls onto the path that the birds immediately eat up.

Sometimes, I can begin to listen—to take the words in—but then, when they reach my anxieties, which are never too far down, that's it, I shut down. That's the seed that falls on rocky ground.

Sometimes the words can take root in me and even grow into understanding, but then, when my anxieties spring up over night, I forget everything I've heard—that's the seed that falls among thorns.

In high school, I had an English teacher, a good one, a great one, Mr. Thompson. When the class would whine, “Mr. Thompson, Shakespeare is SOOOO BORING.” He always had the same response: “We think that we read great literature, but really, it’s the other way around: great literature reads us. And with that, he would flash one of his little mysterious smiles, and go on teaching—as if to say, “You think about that one for a while and get back to me.” Well, we did think about it . . . and talk about it . . . for a while . . . and it took us a while, but . . . “Hey, hey!! Wait a minute! He’s saying it’s not Shakespeare who’s boring, he’s saying . . . he’s saying . . . that it’s us! That *we’re* boring. Hey, Mr. Thompson, is that what you were saying?! That *we’re* boring?! You can’t say that!”

But looking back on it, that’s what he *was* saying. Or at least he was saying this: “Your unwillingness to listen, to pay attention, to take this in, to expend anything more than the absolute minimal effort, to even consider anything that doesn’t conform to what you already know (or at least think you know)—your preoccupation with yourselves and your high school lives, and all the things you think are so important . . . your unwillingness to hear—to see—to feel—the beauty, the power, the humor, the pathos, the words of Shakespeare . . . Well I gotta tell you guys, *you’re* boring *me*—boring me *to death*.”

It’s not that Mr. Thompson didn’t want us to learn: he loved Shakespeare, and he wanted us to love Shakespeare too; and as a teacher, he loved us—he wanted what was good for us, wanted the best for us. And we felt that love—that’s why we listened to him. And all of that made him a great teacher. But Mr. Thompson was also an experienced teacher—he knew that lots of things—many, many, many pre-occupations (their number is legion)—can keep us from listening and learning.

So he had to say something to get our attention; to wake us up, to get us listening and wondering and thinking, and at the same time, he had to say something true about Shakespeare.

Jesus is doing the same thing by speaking in parables: he’s trying to get our attention, to wake us up, to get us listening and wondering and thinking, and at the same time, he’s saying something true about the kingdom of God. As a teacher myself, I learned a lot of things. Here’s one I learned early on: there are lots of ways to be smart.

Looking back on it, my classes probably put a premium on verbal, analytic—and to some degree, imaginative—intelligence. Some students seemed to have a lot; others . . . not so much. But when I got to know the students outside the classroom, and especially when I spent four weeks traveling and studying abroad with a group of students, I saw how many and varied their intellectual gifts were. Some had great interpersonal and emotional intelligence—they kept the group together as a group. Others had what I call “dramatic” intelligence, a gift for seeing, hearing and mimicking gestures, mannerisms, and speech—they kept the group amused (remember we were in England), especially with their imitations of their (ahem) professors (you learn a lot when you travel with students). Others had spatial intelligence, a deep, intuitive awareness of their physical environment. I had one student, Dave, who couldn’t find his way out of a five-page paper to save his life. But by the end of our first day, he could find his way all over Oxford, both the university and the city, without a map. In fact, one day while I was walking down the street, analyzing a philosophical problem, he saved me from stepping right into traffic. (Those people over there drive on the *wrong* side of the road!)

There are lots of ways to be smart, but there’s only one way to be stupid: by not paying attention. And what keeps us from paying attention is our pre-occupations.

Listen: the things we’re pre-occupied with are not necessarily bad.

It’s not a bad thing to think about the philosophical relationship between knowledge and perception. But it is when it keeps me from seeing the truck bearing down on me.

It's not a bad thing to prize verbal, analytical, and imaginative intelligence. But it is when it keeps me from seeing the students right in front of me—their many and varied gifts, and the intrinsic, infinite worth God has given each of them.

It's not a bad thing for me to think about my son's education or my retirement; but it is when it keeps me from listening to him when he's talking to me here and now.

It's not a bad thing for us to care about our lives in this world—our health and sickness, goals and failures, struggles and sorrows, joys and triumphs, accidents and plans—It's not bad at all to think about those things. But when it keeps us from listening to God, when it keeps us from the kingdom of God—it is a bad thing. "Listen," Jesus says again and again, "the kingdom of God is at hand." It's right in front of us. We're just too preoccupied to see it—and to listen to his words about it.

There is only one way to be stupid: by not paying attention. That is, by not paying attention to what we should be paying attention to, which is usually right there in front of us.

With them prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled:
'You will indeed hear, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.'

But when do we cross the line? When does a legitimate—even a loving—concern (not a bad thing) cross the line and become a blinding and deafening preoccupation, with a blindness and deafness that is not physical but willful, bringing about a dullness of heart and mind that makes us stupid? When does *that* happen—what makes *that* happen?

Well, anxiety can do it, for one. When I become so anxious about, so preoccupied with, the future that I lose sight of God, don't even think of God, then I have crossed the line: my anxiety about my future has eclipsed my trust in God and the future God has promised.

But it's not just anxiety. Pride can do it, too. When I can't accept advice or assistance from a friend because of what it might say about me and my shortcomings, then a legitimate sense of my self-worth has crossed the line and become a ridiculous preoccupation with my self-image. It has become a preoccupation that hardens my heart and renders me blind and deaf to the presence of God in my life and in my friend right here and now in front of me.

Greed, too. Whenever I become so preoccupied with getting something—more and more and more and still more of something, whatever it is—whenever I become so preoccupied with that, that I can't see or hear anything else because I do not have eyes to see or ears to anything else, then a legitimate desire for a good thing has crossed the line and become a preoccupation. A preoccupation with what I *don't* have that renders me incapable of enjoying and appreciating what I *do* have—the blessings of God—right here and now in front of me.

I could go on. I could round out the list of the seven deadly sins, and then catalogue all their affiliates and subsidiaries (their number is legion). And then I could show how each sin, when it gets a hold on us, takes a legitimate, even loving, concern, and turns it into a blinding and deafening preoccupation that renders us incapable of hearing or seeing anything else, making us dull of heart and mind, in other words, making us stupid.

When does *that* happen? All the time. To all of us.

What makes *that* happen? Sin.

But that's not good news. It's not even news.

But this is: Jesus says to us:

If you look with your eyes,
and listen with your ears,
and understand with your heart and turn—
I will heal you.'

He's saying something to get our attention, to wake us up, to get us listening and wondering and thinking, and at the same time, he's saying something true about the kingdom of God.

All we have to do is listen. Which, as I've said, is hard for us because we're so preoccupied. But that's part of the healing: our liberation from these blinding, deafening and debilitating preoccupations. Actually that's the heart of the healing: that our hearts will be made right, that we will begin to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and our neighbors as ourselves, and then . . .well, then, everything else will follow. We will be able to listen.

Listening then is an act of love—first, God's act of love in sending Jesus to heal us, and then our acts love for God, self, and neighbor, as we listen—a listening that is both the consequence and cause of our healing.

So what Jesus says to his first disciples will also true for us:

Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

So are we listening?

Take a moment.

Shut your eyes for a moment.

Remember those in your life who have listened to you in love.

Think of those you want to—you need to—listen to.

Listen to your heart.

Take a moment.

Listen to God, speaking to you.

Listening is an act of love. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.