

March 12, 2023  
“Grace is a Listening Ear”

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

John 4:5-42

At some point or other on my shelves has rested a book or two on the art of listening. Some of us, I know, are believed to be more adept than others at listening, but I have heard it said that in order to be a good listener a person simply has to stop talking. Pastoral care, generally tends to be about what is termed attentive listening, but it can be so much more, particularly in the church context. This past Friday as people arrived for the Friday Soup Lunch, I noticed from the quiet of the church office the increasing volume of energetic conversation. It is one of the best parts about a community gathering such as a soup lunch. You hear the joy in the back and forth between speaking and hearing as news is shared, stories are told, and friendships cemented. This kind of hum of conversation is a meeting of exchange, and even though it is a social gathering with food at its centre, there is a mutually receptive “ministry” of pastoral care going on. Most of it is unintentional and is simply perceived as “visiting,” but no matter why you are there, what your everyday circumstances are, it is a multi-blessing of filling up with food, a flow of interactive conversation, and a wellbeing check-in. And, isn’t it great to know that for that hour or so you are at the table there is welcome, just as you are.

The hum of conversation in the context of the Friday Soup Lunch warms my heart. In other contexts, however, I have noticed that vocal arts of a different sort are becoming more generally employed in society in a frantic belief that needs or wants will be met, or fears such as disempowerment will be overturned. There seems to be a lot of polarized yelling going on these days. You may also have also noticed that when people are busy yelling, they aren’t doing much listening. A well-equipped leader may also want to have books to hand on how to manage

conflict and bullying; books that invoke assertive listening with tips on de-escalating, negotiating, setting boundaries, and being present to the emotions and fears underpinning the loud retort of yelling.

Take, for example, the Exodus account of the Israelites journeying in the wilderness with Promised Land dreams to hand but no water to drink. The rumbles turn to quarrelling and no doubt yelling as the weary and parched travellers in exile yearn for moisture to cross parched lips and are blaming Moses for every trouble. “God, help me,” Moses cries out, “These people are about to stone me.” Fear has turned to yelling and is about to turn into a violent insurrection. Intervention is needed, and Moses turns to the best self-help advice he can find. God listens, and works with Moses to come up with a plan—you might even call it a pastoral response as no one is to fault that there is no water readily available in the wilderness. “Pick up your staff, Moses,” says God, “and take a couple of elders with you to Mount Horeb. There you will find me standing before a rock, strike the rock and water will come out of it.” The point of the story is to demonstrate God-With-Us, but in hearing the deep need of a thirsty people and in facilitating with a strategy to quench the thirst, God reveals how important it is to listen. In this case the emphasis is on remembering to listen to God. Pastoral care in a church community setting rests well when the heart of it rests with God.

The marvellously long account from John’s Gospel you just heard read is also about thirst. It begins with Jesus journeying through Samaria on his way home to Galilee. He is hot, weary, and parched. And what could be worse than sitting beside a well at high noon, perhaps even leaning over the edge to see your hot, weary self reflected in the water below, but no bucket with which to draw up some of its cool wetness to quench your immediate direst need? Jesus is patient. He simply sits beside the well and waits. And sure enough along comes a Samaritan

woman to draw water. With a curt “give me a drink,” Jesus indicates his need to her. Her surprise is evident on several levels. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” In her mind, and probably the mind of the status quo, Jesus had broken through two well-established rules. He has breached the polarizing nature of ethnicity (interestingly, Jews and Samaritans have shared ancestry), and he has spoken directly to an unaccompanied woman. It is hard to decide who is bolder than whom, the one in speaking his need, or the other in answering. Then, in an even bolder move, the two find their way into an in-depth dialogue. Even more intriguing, Jesus jumps in immediately with God-talk not by way of judgement or proselytization, but by way of the gift of God.

With the invitation to consider the gift of God, the encounter between the woman of Samaria and Jesus takes a turn. Jesus has read the situation. At the heat of the day when everyone else is at home, out of the sun, and probably enjoying lunch and a siesta, the woman has ventured out to fill her buckets with water. She is avoiding an encounter with neighbours who fear her unconventionality and probably yell at her and may even have lobbed a few stones in her direction. We can imagine the woman drawing water and sharing a cup with Jesus. From the well of compassion, Jesus transposes the practical nature of water into living water. Drink of living water and you will never thirst again. By way of metaphor, Jesus is describing for her the gift of God’s grace, and with a probing question he offers her a listening ear.

Back in the day of my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) units, our supervisor, Sister Colleen (Sisters of St. Joseph), drilled into us Carl Rogers’ three tenets for essential pastoral care presence: unconditional positive regard, non-judgemental, and empathy. It wasn’t that you had to affirm someone’s actions or experience, but rather be present to their pain. “Go, call your husband, and come back,” Jesus says to the Samaritan woman. There could be a gentle

judgement implied in the directive, but in the trust developed in their short initial encounter (Jesus didn't yell at her or threaten her with deadly force), the woman opens up with her truth and tells her story. In CPE this was described and taught to us as narrative therapy. And it works—the woman works her way through a deep self-disclosure to emerge with a depth of theological understanding of God's grace as being available to everyone no matter the circumstance and her sense of wellbeing and life forward from that moment on is refreshed by God's gift of living water. Jesus was simply the conduit by which she came to a conclusion that enabled in her reconciliation, renewal, and healing peace.

Predictably the peace is somewhat broken when Jesus' disciples return from a shopping trip to the grocery store in town where they had gone to buy food. The disciples are astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman, but they were learning and no judgement was spoken aloud. The woman leaves her water jar beside the well, but filled with the living water Jesus has offered her as a gift from God, she heads back to town refreshed and renewed. She courageously speaks an invitation of "come and see" to those whose habit had been to condemn her. The disciples then go about setting up a picnic and encouraging Jesus to eat something. As with the water, Jesus turns the food they have brought him into a metaphor of the food of sustenance of a different sort—the completion of his call to ministry on God's behalf. It can be interpreted as Jesus engaged in a pastoral care ministry of universal healing peace. A freely given gift to all who hear of God's infinite grace, receive it, and carry it with them by way of open invitation, as a listening ear and gentle presence, as God-with-us, and as a gift of infinite hope wherever and whenever despair bears down. With respect to the Samaritan woman, curiosity overcame condemnation, and many returned to the well to feed upon Jesus' wisdom and compassion. We can always choose to do likewise.

Too often I have heard people say “I could never do that” when asked to join a pastoral care team. And no one, least of all Jesus is asking that of everybody. Part of agreeing to be on any church committee or parish ministry is discerning where one’s gifts lie. Jesus is, however, encouraging everyone to find their way of life in the Healing One, to be open to God’s grace, and to respond with lives vested in the eternal wisdom of the “Golden Rule”: treat others as you would wish to be treated. Sometimes this comes by way of discerning when to listen and when to speak; by developing the art of speaking well with others with healing peace to mind; by tapping into the living water of God’s grace and in finding peace with self; of discerning how to be at peace with others and hope for them the same peace.

We know well the toll of power-mongering, debilitating fears for the future, hard-to-bear burdens, sufferings, and violent disruptions that are creating havoc in peoples’ lives and their sense of wellbeing. The significant unrest of our time has turned many into yellers and can invoke a near panic response, but with God’s grace made manifest we just might find the courage of the Samaritan woman within ourselves to declare a renewed faith in God-Spirit and in Jesus’s proposal to greet fear and despair with a listening ear and a giving heart. With every faith-filled effort, there will be a turn around, and God’s will for peace on earth will have a chance to be heard and made manifest. Indeed, I truly believe each of us holds the heart of it in our hands. Amen.