

Listen First

James 1:17-27

April 23, 2023

This Easter season, I want to address a cynical and damaging perception about the Church of Jesus Christ. Now, you won't hear this perception articulated directly, but it is an unspoken assumption in far too many congregations. It goes like this: the primary mission of the Church is to serve the members of the Church. This myth can cause congregations to operate by the rules of consumer culture or political expediency—to cater to the base, to keep the customers happy. We see it in preachers who aim only to reinforce the preexisting perspectives of parishioners. We see it in worshipers who demand this constant confirmation. We see it in churches obsessed with mere survival, becoming carefully curated clubs for likeminded individuals, rarely reaching beyond the familiar and comfortable confines of self-selected assemblies. (I've got some feelings about this...)

When we allow these fears to control us, the Church tends toward stagnation. We become overly institutional, inwardly focused, unadventurous, and... well...boring. We cease to be a called community of courageous witness to the Gospel. A friend of mine in Charlotte, a pastor there, tells the story about an encounter after worship one Sunday morning. A member of the church marched up to the pastor—finger wagging—and proclaimed, "I did not like worship today." My friend was feeling bold that morning and responded just as sharply. "That's okay. We weren't worshipping you." Now as far as I know, both the pastor and the member are still a part of that church.

But here's the truth: The Church does not exist for the sake of the Church. Our highest aim is not self-preservation.

The Church exists solely *by* the grace of God and *for* the world God loves. We are called to be a movement of the Spirit. Ours is a faith that demands action.

Nowhere in scripture is this clearer than in the letter of James, a little book often disregarded toward the end of the New Testament, written to confront and encourage readers to live what they have learned and come to believe. Like the Old Testament prophets he echoes, James is utterly uninterested in institutional maintenance. He is animated by the formation of a people, a Church, capable of living the way of Jesus. Justice. Kindness. Humility. James demands and desires soul-shaping community and deeply transformative impact. Faith in Action. The words of scripture demand it. The world needs it. And so, this is what we seek this Eastertide at Second Church. Let's get started.

Several years ago, the journalist Tom Friedman coined a phrase that captures the spirit of our time. Friedman writes, "It is the malady of modernity. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age and have finally come to the Age of Interruption." He quotes consultant Linda Stone, who labels ours an era of "continuous partial attention." Her description makes me squirm a bit, precisely because it offers such an accurate picture of my life. She writes, "Continuous partial attention is when you are checking Facebook on your phone, watching a show on a second screen, typing an email on your laptop, and answering a question from your kid all at the same time. That is, you are multitasking your way through the day, continuously devoting only partial attention to each act or person you encounter."

Guilty as charged. We all experience it, whether we are the culprit or the victim. Unlimited access to unvetted information and endless connection means ubiquitous interruption. Phones ring and pulsate with urgent notifications during meetings, concerts, movies, weddings, funerals, even church services. I remember a couple of years ago when a phone rang during the middle of a wedding rehearsal I was leading. Now, I was frustrated and impatient, bordering on furious, because before we had started the rehearsal, I had been very clear that everyone should silence their phones. So, members of the wedding party began frantically reaching for theirs, then looking up at me with relief. The phone kept ringing. It was mine. Now, before you judge me too harshly, how many of you just checked to be sure your phone was silenced? Continuous partial attention. Most of the time, it's all we get or have to give.

Centuries before the Age of Interruption, James saw that a failure to listen well would jeopardize the mission of God's people. According to James, *first* we must listen.

Now, it's possible that you find it curious that we begin a series on faith in action with a call to listen. Listening can seem so passive. Some of you might remember that here at Second we are in the midst of a whole program year focused on the theme of "*speaking* the truth in love." Those words come from another New Testament letter, to the Ephesians. We are called to speak the truth in love, to do so in a way that reflects God's Word to us.

But the theologian Paul Tillich reminds us that, "the first duty of love is to listen."

James is equally clear: Followers of Jesus are called to learn and model a new way of living in community—a way that makes listening a priority.

So here is my confession: Listening, especially listening with undivided attention, does not come naturally for me. I am a native at home in the Age of Interruption. My parents and my older sister would be quick to confirm that I've been annoyingly

loquacious and prone to interjection since I could speak in full sentences. And at my home, I am now reaping what I sowed those decades ago. (We'll get to anger in a moment...) I once caused the interruption of a televised college basketball game with a particularly pointed and well-timed observation for the referees. (I'd love to tell you the story after worship.) As a trained debater, I am practiced at forming my own points even as my conversation partner is sharing theirs—that one would be quickly confirmed by Sara.

And so, I need the guidance that James offers, that listening must come first and that listening well and speaking are mutually exclusive actions. *We all* need this guidance in a time when interruption has spiraled into cycles of rage and retribution.

Quick to listen. Slow to speak. Slow to anger.

All week long I've been contemplating how a shortage of listening is tied to a surplus of anger. My reflections on the subject have been deepened by a distinction made by the professor Arthur Brooks who distinguishes between the productive anger that drives needed change and something far more dangerous: contempt—a noxious brew of anger and disgust. Contempt results from and leads back to a refusal to listen well. Brooks quotes a philosopher who defines contempt as "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another." Contempt is driving us apart, causing deep and damaging harm. It is true in our personal relationships and in our labeling of others. And when contempt is combined with ready access to weaponry, it can make a rush to anger deadly. To paraphrase James, our contempt is not producing God's justice.

Be quick to listen. Slow to interrupt. Determined to avoid contempt for one another.

James lays out a profound challenge for people of faith. Before we speak, can we listen in love for a truth that might be hard to hear? Before we speak, can we stand in a place of nonjudgment and humility long enough to hear? Before we speak, can we listen for the voices often silenced or drowned

out in the chaotic cacophony of our days and the algorithms that drive our social interactions? Can we listen?

I find that this is particularly difficult when someone is sharing their pain, especially pain that we have caused or allowed. The impulse is to begin formulating our response, to justify our actions, to defend our silence, when what is often most needed is simply space, simply silence, simply a commitment to generous listening.

I do wonder if practicing such awareness in our interpersonal encounters—or within the community of faith—has the capacity to ladder up and scale out over time. As we consider the role of this church, this congregation, in the broader community we exist to serve, I want to wonder with you. Could one of our responsibilities be to model practices of listening across diverse perspectives? Could we, right here, prioritize listening carefully to the stories, the strengths, the gifts, and the challenges of our neighbors before we formulate reasons for their struggles or solutions that privilege our limited perspective? Could we listen? Could we together condemn contempt as a betrayal of the image of God in each person we encounter? Could we listen for the truth in love?

I've been looking, and I don't see many examples of this essential practice. I don't see many models to follow in the world outside the church or in our own lives. Simple acts like walking across the street to listen to a neighbor whose yard sign is different than yours. Seeking out voices and stories that may be uncomfortable for you to hear. Intentionally sharing a table or a cup of coffee with someone whose life, identity, or passion is unfamiliar to you. Perhaps we are called to stand in that gap, to offer ourselves as a witness to the power of listening in an age of interruption and contempt.

I think James knew how difficult this would be for us because he recommends bringing our speech under control in an evocative metaphorical way. He

says to bridle your tongues. If he were writing today, he might say *curb your mean-spirited words, curtail your contempt, seek out ways to be **constructive**, not **destructive**.*

James is clear with us that pure religion is faith in action, that we are called to care for those in distress, for neighbors in desperate need, for all on the outside looking in.

We ask: Where do we begin?

Listen. Listen. Listen.

Amen.