

“Are You a Good Listener? Well, Are You?”

By Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2021
Based upon Mark 9:2-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21

At the risk of beginning a sermon that will assure all of you that I am not a cool person, I must confess that I am not savvy when it comes to acronyms. I get LOL, OMG, NASA, and NSA. Beyond that, I have to think! So when my colleague enthusiastically told me about her Lenten study entitled “Jesus:IRL,” I said, “That’s sounds great!” and then I had to google IRL. I am sure some of you are rolling your eyes right now. But as it turns out, IRL is an acronym for lots of things: Indy Racing League, Industrial Robot Language, Information Resources Limited, In Real Life. Oh, that’s it, I thought, Jesus: In Real Life!

And it is in fact that, based on a book titled “IRL” which isn’t a particularly religious book, but my colleague took its theme on redefining connection beyond the internet and social media and decided to apply it to our spiritual journeys in the season of Lent which begins this Wednesday. As pastors, there are times when we use a lot of theological and biblical language and forget or fail to connect it to what it all means IRL; in real life. You are blessed at Prince of Peace to have a pastor who preaches with an astute sensitivity to taking sound theology and making real life applications as we try to follow Jesus in the 21st Century.

Our text this morning is the biblical story known as the Transfiguration. Mark recounts the actual event and Peter offers his eyewitness account. But the story eludes us. It’s hard to get hold of, especially for what it might mean for us in real life today. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him on a hike up a mountain. They arrive and before them, Jesus is changed. He’s transfigured. His garments become dazzling unlike any dazzling that’s ever been seen. The prophets Elijah and Moses appear and speak with Jesus. Peter gets a great idea which actually is pretty wrong-headed, but considering the disciples were terrified, it’s understandable that Peter was trying to figure out what to make of this scene. “Hey, Jesus, it’s good to be here. Let’s build a dwelling for you and Elijah and Moses.” According to biblical scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, the event was as elusive to Peter as it is to readers of this story today. Peter wanted to control and domesticate the mystery. And he saw Jesus as an equal to Moses and Elijah wanting to put him into the same dwelling space. But the voice comes from the cloud to make some corrections. Jesus is different from Elijah and Moses. “This is my Son!” “Listen to him.” The voice of God makes it clear that the disciples need to pay careful attention to Jesus to understand what God is trying to do in the world.

Suddenly the disciples look around, there’s no more dazzle, no more Elijah no Moses, no further voice from the clouds. They are on the mountaintop with Jesus with the instruction to “Listen to him.” That instruction was meant for followers of Jesus in all times and places. That would be us. Rowan Williams in his book “Being A Christian” writes that the Christian life is a listening life. We expect to be spoken to by God. How does that happen, IRL? Are you a good listener? Well, are you?

I mean talk about elusive. If I asked all or most of you if you listen to Jesus, you would say, "Of course!" Then my next question would be, "All right, tell me about that. Get real about what it means for us who claim to love and follow Jesus to listen to him in 2021... when there is just so much to listen to. Well??? Other than just hearing words coming from Jesus' mouth, how were those disciples supposed to listen to him and how are we?"

In an attempt to answer that question, I want to do a little Bible Study. I want us to go back to what went on prior to this hike up the mountain. In Chapter 8 for the first time, Jesus tells the disciples about his death and resurrection. Peter is appalled that Jesus would talk about such things. Then with the disciples Jesus gathers the crowds and lays it out as to what it means to be his followers. Those who want to become my followers must **deny themselves** and **take up their cross**. Peter's anxiety is increasing. The public relations factor is not getting better here, and to this day, we struggle with this passage. But if we are going to listen to him, this is where it begins, with Jesus telling us what we must do if we are going to be followers.

First of all, deny yourself! Hmm! The Greek word for denial means to disown, renounce a claim, have nothing to do with. Yikes! So, does self-denial mean that we should have nothing more to do with ourselves, disown ourselves? If that's what it means, we should all have second thoughts about following Jesus. This verse has often been mishandled in three very damaging ways:

1. It's been used to keep folk in their place as other dominate. "A woman's place is in the home." "We were very good to our slaves. They should be thankful that we gave them a home and good work." "It's really better for the mentally ill to live apart from society. We're only thinking of them. Yes, that does deny them social connections, but even the scriptures tell us to deny ourselves."
2. It's been used for materialistic shaming. "Hmm! I see you are going to Home Depot today for yet another garden tool to put among the 50 garden tools you have in your garage." "You go to Starbucks on your way to work your shift as a nurse in the emergency room? Really, that must get expensive!" "Your house is nice. Do you really need this much space? You know the Bible says to deny ourselves."
3. It's been used for psychological shaming. "Honey, I know that you think you are called to be a minister, but the Bible clearly states that women can't. So, let's say a prayer and see what else God has planned for you even if you think you are feeling this call." "So, you're gay. Well, you don't have to be. I know a good conversion therapist. And even Jesus told us to deny ourselves so that we can follow him."

Dangerous and misconstrued interpretations of this passage, and by the way, no self-reflection, just pointing fingers at others. Jesus did not come to shame and diminish. He came to redeem and fulfill humanity that we might be our truest selves with all the life-giving possibilities.

So, what are we listening to when we hear Jesus say, “to become my followers, let them deny themselves?” What this means is that **we must rearrange the relationship we have with ourselves so that we allow Jesus to be our Lord because we so often want to be our own lord** with the attitude, “We’re in charge of ourselves. We don’t need God (except when it’s convenient to us). We don’t need anyone. We’re strong, on our own. We’ll show that to the world.” And we know what happens and have many examples of people who try to be their own god. They become the center of the universe and a demagogue full of delusions. And the very sad thing is, not only can they never be challenged but they can never be comforted either.

Are we going to allow Jesus to be our Lord or do we just call upon him when we need him? Is our faith going to be nothing more than a ritual of going to worship, getting kiddos baptized, and calling the pastor when we need a wedding or a funeral? Who is going to be our Lord? Now, if we allow Jesus to be our Lord, we’ll be challenged. I always know to raise a red flag when God starts to sound too much like me. My hope is to align myself with the mind of Christ, but even when that happens, God is still challenging me, stretching me, letting me know where I need to grow or step out of a comfort zone. When God starts to sound too much like me, I have to ask who is my Lord? Me or Jesus?

The late Rachel Held Evans in her book “Searching for Sunday” writes, “God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life, so if you want in on God’s business, be prepared to follow God to some rock bottom, scorched earth, dead on arrival corners of the world including those corners in your own heart because that is where God gardens.” Listening to Jesus and taking matters up with him is not easy. And I guarantee that justice and truth will never be factored out of anything God in Jesus Christ has to say to us. But, as the philosopher Soren Kirkegaard said, “Hope is the passion for what is possible,” and **hope** is also never factored out of anything God in Jesus Christ has to say to us.

The second thing Jesus said for those who want to be followers was: “Take up your cross and follow me.” Again, a text that has often been misconstrued and mishandled. Cross bearing does not define whatever ill-fated circumstances we find ourselves in at any given moment. “That teenager of mine. She’s my cross to bear right now.” “I just have to accept my medical circumstances right now. It’s my cross to bear.” Yes, medical conditions, treatments, life adjustments are heavy and realities that must be addressed. But they are not what Jesus was talking about when he said **take up your cross**. The cross that we bear is the cross of doing God’s will. The cross that followers of Jesus bear is not permitting ourselves to be diverted from the mission of doing what is right in God’s eyes. Again, it’s not easy. It certainly wasn’t easy for Jesus.

So back to that mountaintop, where that voice says, “Listen to him,” we can respond, “Sure thing! I am a Christian. I always listen to God.” Or we can think about what is involved in our listening. Following Jesus, listening to him involves allowing Jesus to be our Lord, connecting with Jesus in order to connect with all God is doing and not allowing ourselves to be diverted from God’s mission of righteousness, justice, and truth. Are you a good listener? Well, are you?

The late Dallas Willard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California led the way in thoughtful exploration in the experience of Christian spiritual formation. He introduced a model called “The Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth.” It’s a way of listening to God in order to draw us closer to the mind of Christ. Now, I need be very clear at this point that Willard was quite adamant that this model does not fall into the category of merit or achievement on our part. It is God’s grace that brings us closer to God’s intentions. It is God’s willingness to be present to our formation. Our job is to pay attention, to be listening with minds and hearts.

I was going to draw this triangle for you and place it on the screen, but I’d rather us hang together and try to understand this virtually face to face. At the top of the triangle is the Holy Spirit. At one of the bottom angles are the spiritual practices with which we intentionally engage. There are contemplative practices and engaging practices. On your bulletin cover this morning is a picture of the Church of the Transfiguration in Grand Teton National Park. There’s a window inside that looks to the mountains reminding us of the Transfiguration story, and indeed this setting provides a very quiet space for silence and mediation. It’s actively used today. It’s not exactly outside our front door but having places and spaces that we associate with contemplation is a spiritual discipline as is fasting, Bible reading, solitude, silence, being in nature. Then there are the engaging spiritual practices being part of Bible study, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, worship, prayer, music, discussing current events from a faith perspective, exercising our bodies. There are many practices.

What’s important is not that we engage in all these practices, (we couldn’t possibly do that), but that we are consistent in the one or more in which we do participate. And I will also say that if you shy away from any one of them, that’s probably the one you should practice for a time. So, these practices are part of this triangle and practice, practice, practice is the important word.

Now at the other angle of the triangle are the events of the day; work, school, neighborhoods, family, friends, impeachment trials, outcomes of impeachment trials, viruses, partisan politics, immigrants, birthday parties, funerals, births, celebrations, current events, headlines, the **events of our day!** We are not on our own in this triangle. The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives to bring our spiritual disciplines and events of the day together in order to cultivate our ability to listen and connect to God in Jesus Christ, to draw us closer to the mind of God’s good intentions. This is how we can listen to him IRL, connecting those practices that form us spiritually with real life circumstances believing that the Holy Spirit works in our lives.

Willard writes that Christians often ask the wrong question when challenging circumstances arise, “What would Jesus do?” Willard states that we then might attempt to imitate at that moment what we think Jesus’ behavior or response would be. He writes we may as well ask “What would Beethoven do and then sit down and attempt to play the piano.” The better question is “What did Jesus do before the intense situation arose?” The Gospels tell us what he did. He practiced prayer, retreat, worship, recalling scripture. These practices shaped him to be in relationship with the Father, better equipped to listen.

According to a legend, one of the ancient desert monks approached the teacher and asked, “Holy One, what can I do to make myself enlightened?” The teacher replied, “As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning.” The surprised and slightly irritated monk demanded more from the teacher, “What!? Then what use are these spiritual practices that you prescribe?” The teacher responded, “To make sure that you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.”

We are not on our own in the practice of listening to God, the Holy Spirit sees to it that we hear the voice of God in our real-life situations. We practice these disciplines not to earn God’s favor or to get God’s attention. Rather, we practice them so that we can give our attention to God, so that we can listen to the one who is always ready to speak to us **IRL (In real life)**. Are you a good listener? Well, are you? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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