

**Present, Not Just Quiet**  
**Date: 01/09/2022**  
**Exodus 33.7-16 John 8.2-9**  
**Tools For New-Year Living**  
**Dr. William M. Smutz**

John 8.2-9 (NRSV)

*8<sup>2</sup> Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, <sup>4</sup> they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. <sup>5</sup> Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” <sup>6</sup> They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup> And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.*

*<sup>9</sup> When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup> Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” <sup>11</sup> She said, “No one, sir.”<sup>[b]</sup> And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”]]*

When I feel like I’m not being listened to –that the one I’m in conversation with, is not taking me seriously, is not paying attention to my words, does not value the connection between us...when I feel like I’m not being listened to, I go to a bad place in my head and my gut. It’s not just that I’m angry with the person whom I feel isn’t listening to me. It’s deeper. More primal. More painful. By not listening, the one with whom I’m communicating, is screaming at me without using words –screaming that I’m not of interest, I’m not to be trusted, I’m not of worth. And these are hard, distasteful realities to absorb. Hard realities that keep me from fully claiming my worth as a child of God; hard realities that affect my ability to listen to others; hard realities that work against the wisdom which Jesus invites all of us to acquire, so that we may live faithfully for and with each other.

Listening is so crucial to our being able to connect to one another; our being able to trust each other; our being able to grow into a community of caring and compassion and justice and love –all in imitation of Jesus whom we follow and serve. Trust is critical to us as individuals, and just as critical to us together as a community. If we do not have trust for one another, we have no hope of building a community together. If we do not feel others trust us individually, we have no hope of achieving the wisdom God desires for us.

On a surface level, our Exodus lesson is about the need of God’s people for God’s presence. But below the surface, Moses’ request to God has everything to do with trust. Can God be trusted to continue to protect the people of Israel and see them safe into new place where they are in charge of themselves, and don’t have to make bricks for anyone they don’t want to. Despite God’s getting Israel out of Egypt, Moses knows almost nothing about the identity and purposes of God and so isn’t completely sure that God can be trusted.

I think we best understand the continuing string of questions to God as springing from Moses’ deep anxiety about God’s trustworthiness. If Moses was not so anxious, he would undoubtedly understand God’s listening presence as God’s promise of on-going relationship. But trust is hard, especially when the wounds of Pharaoh’s untrustworthiness are so fresh--so raw. And so, Moses and the people of Israel struggle to allow themselves to embrace a deeper relationship with this God on whom they depend for everything! Trust is hard!

Gaining wisdom, growing in wisdom, that we may grow in the art of living as we enter this New Year, is our January sermon conversation—a conversation that I believe is important to us in general as people of faith and particularly important for First Presbyterian as we work together to move toward what is next...moving from what might have been, to what needs to be, to what God is able to do with and through us! Growing in wisdom is the pursuit of a lifetime and is also something to which we can attend every day! Gaining wisdom involves so many pieces: the learning we do in a classroom; the materials we read and watch; those who influence us over time; the accumulation of life experiences; those we talk with, and especially those to whom we listen. Listening is foundational to the development of wisdom.

I think a major part of the wisdom deficit our world, and particularly our country, is experiencing at this time is the value we seem to place on having the loudest voice. The one who makes the most noise; the one who successfully drowns out every other voice, is deemed the winner. In this approach wisdom is given no value; is not even worthy of mention. But having wisdom, developing wisdom, becoming wise and exercising our wisdom on behalf of others—all of this is important to us, because our Creator-God has made us to be wise and Jesus—whom we follow—invites us to utilize our God-given wisdom in everything we do.

The listening that Jesus teaches us to utilize as we practice wisdom, is not just about using our ears, but about using our whole being—every cell and molecule. For the listening that Jesus teaches us is about being present, not just about being quiet and being present, it's about having total focus on another; focus which allows us to perceive facial expressions and subtle muscle movement. Being present is about hearing what one is expressing through their eyes. Being present is about having close enough physical proximity to hear those sighs that are too deep for words.

In our Gospel lesson from John, Jesus appears to not be listening. How many of us have someone in our lives who never seems to be paying attention when we're speaking? Someone who couldn't make eye contact with us if their life depended on it? Yet, someone who, when we ask them if they are listening to us can immediately repeat back everything we've been saying? Jesus seems to be this person in our Gospel story.

Jesus gives every impression of not listening—absorbed instead by drawing in the dust before him with his fingers. But when the loudest voices give up being in control, when the crowd around him stops shouting, Jesus makes clear that he's been paying attention to every word, by asking the question—the wise question—that goes to the very heart of the matter. Upon hearing his question, the crowd realizes how present, how attentive Jesus is to them. In the face of this active presence, the loud voices realize they have nothing of worth to say, and no foundation upon which to speak and they go away leaving Jesus fully present to the tormented child of God before him listening to her and caring for her at every possible level.

This is the kind of listening you and I are invited to practice with each other and with all others. Listening that takes the whole being of the other with complete seriousness. Listening that reflects a heart and mind that is open to the other, listening that seeks wisdom rather than being right, listening that fully embraces the child of God before us!

For our spiritual homework this week, let us reflect on the listening we do most of the time and how we can continually evolve this listening from just hearing words to being fully present to and with the one with whom we are communicating. This kind of listening is not natural for us; and this kind of listening is not valued much in the present day, and so, to be fully present in our listening requires practice and patience and more practice, and more practice. We don't have to draw in the dust with our finger like Jesus but we can and must follow his model of listening that makes a difference; of listening that is wise; of listening that gives life!

Copyright 2022 William M. Smutz

Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into The Mystery and Art of Living*