

**LEARNING TO LISTEN***by Elaine Poproski***1 CORINTHIANS 13:1 – 7**

Jesus asked fantastic questions. A lot of times, the questions he asked were rhetorical – he wasn't expecting his listeners to answer, he often followed the question with a parable or some other kind of teaching in answer to his own question. But other times he asked a question and, whether or not his listeners answered out loud, it was clearly a question meant to be answered by his listeners, and, sometimes, by us as well.

There's a story that both Matthew and Mark record in their gospels. In the story, the disciples are with Jesus in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is asleep. A huge storm hits the boat, threatening to capsize them – to drown them all. Jesus keeps sleeping. So the disciples yell for him to wake up and help, which Jesus does. But then Jesus asks this question: Why are you afraid?<sup>i</sup>

This is such a great question. On the surface it seems like a silly question because they're afraid that they're all about to die. But as terrifying as the storm was, and as real as was the danger to their very lives, the question Jesus asked was a rebuke of sorts. It was like Jesus was asking them who they thought was more powerful – the storm or Jesus; it was like Jesus was asking them who they truly believed he was.

The reason I like this question is because I think it's a question Jesus continues to ask us. It's a question that rises up every time we are afraid; it forces us to examine the implied, deeper question: Is Jesus, or is he not, more powerful than whatever it is I am afraid of? Is Jesus truly the Word of God who was with God in the beginning and who thus wields power over creation itself? Is Jesus truly the Son of God who has been given authority over all powers and principalities of this world and the next?

This is the power of a good question. It invites reflection and introspection. There are multiple layers to the question, which means the listener can choose how much of ourselves we want to reveal in the answering.

Another of Jesus' great questions is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There's a blind beggar (in Matthew there are two of them) who come to Jesus, clearly looking to be healed. And Jesus asks this question: What do you want me to do for you?<sup>ii</sup>

It seems like a ridiculous question, doesn't it? They're blind. They want to see. It's obvious. So why did Jesus ask the question? What was the point? Why didn't he just heal them and move on?

In John's gospel there's a story about a man who'd been ill for 38 years. He kept going to this pool in Jerusalem that was known for healing people, but he couldn't get into the pool by himself, and no one helped him. When Jesus saw him, he asked this: Do you want to be made well?<sup>iii</sup>

Again...Can you imagine a more ridiculous question? Imagine seeing someone in clear need of medical attention, sprawled on a sidewalk outside a hospital after having been dumped out of a car. Would any of us ask if the person wants to be made well? Of course not. We'd get the person into the hospital. We'd get them the help they need.

So why did Jesus ask the question? What was the point?

I think the point was human dignity – respect for their autonomy and agency.

Have you ever had an experience of someone assuming, incorrectly, that they knew what you needed or wanted, and so went ahead without even offering you a choice in the matter? Maybe someone ordered food for you on a date, instead of letting you order your own food. Or maybe you live in an apartment where someone else controls the heat, with no concern for your comfort or preference. There are lots of examples around us – too many – of people who aren't permitted to make their own choices about things way bigger than who orders food on a date or who controls the thermostat in an apartment. We have a lot of difficulty, it seems, deciding when people should or should not have the freedom to choose. For instance, should women be free to choose whether or not to remain pregnant? Should the chronically or terminally ill be free to choose when and where they will die? Should all people be guaranteed sufficient financial resources to freely choose the food they will eat or the places they will live? Should the mentally ill be free to choose whether or not to be medicated? The list goes on. We have difficulty deciding when and if people should have the freedom to choose.

(Of course, sometimes a person's freedom to choose has to be removed or limited. For instance, if a person chooses to murder people, we need to remove their freedom to make that choice. But more often than not, it's not so cut and dry as that.)

I think Jesus may have asked these seemingly ridiculous questions because he understood the importance of our freedom to choose – the importance of making our own decisions, even bad ones. I think it mattered to him that we were created to have the freedom to choose. It doesn't mean there aren't consequences to our choices, but they're our choices to make. And when we remove someone's freedom of choice, we strip them of their inherent human dignity.

I think Jesus understood that the people to whom he was speaking on these occasions had very little control – very little freedom to choose anything in their lives. By asking these questions: *What do you want me to do for you?* and *Do you want to be made well?*... By asking these questions, and by, we assume, respecting their answers, he was telling them and everyone who heard what he asked, that these people had worth.

What do the questions we ask say about what we think of those answering? Do we value what they have to say? Do we truly want to know what they have to say?

Recently, I was part of a small group discussion in which the facilitator of that discussion asked a number of questions. Over and over again, the questions were asked in such a way as to make it clear that the asker already knew how he wanted us to answer. It felt like it was my job as a participant in the discussion to guess the right answer. Even if the question was posed as if he wanted our opinion or our experience, it seemed like there was a right answer and a wrong answer. As a result, I left that discussion with the impression that my opinions and experiences weren't valued – that I wasn't valued.

Have you ever experienced anything like that?

As important as it is to ask good questions, it's perhaps even more important to listen to the answers. I think, when it comes down to it, even the most powerful questions we can ask are only powerful if we listen to people's answers. Jesus' questions to the blind beggar and the man by the pool were only powerful because he truly wanted to know their answers.

We don't have any stories of people who answered the *Do you want to be made well?* question with a *no*. But just as there are people today who seem to prefer staying as they are over being well, so there must have been in Jesus' day. And everything I know about Jesus leads me to think that if they said no to Jesus' question, he would have respected that answer because he respected them.

Think about the man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. He and Jesus went back and forth a bit and then Jesus said to him, "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor... Then come, follow me."<sup>iv</sup> When the man couldn't do as Jesus directed, he walked away. And Jesus let him. Because Jesus respected him as a human being with the inherent right and freedom to choose for himself.

Jesus didn't ask questions just to make people feel included. He asked questions because he valued people's answers. And because he valued people's answers, he listened.

Have you ever felt really, truly heard? Like the person to whom you were talking not only cared about what you were saying, but they wanted to understand what you were saying? They weren't distracted, they asked good questions, they made eye contact, they didn't change the subject when it was their turn to talk, they didn't judge you. Have you ever felt heard like that? Have you ever known someone who really listened to you?

In the book we're reading together, *How to Revive Evangelism*, the author quotes someone else, who made this statement: Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable.<sup>v</sup> What do you think about that statement? Do you think it's true?

"Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable."

I've never read the book out of which this quote comes. I don't know if it's based on solid research or if it's just something the original author believes. But to me, it rings true.

Jesus was all about love. He lived the greatest commandments – *Love God* and *Love your Neighbour*. He told us that we're not just supposed to love the people we like, but also our enemies. He gave us this commandment: *Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*<sup>vi</sup>

In 1 John we read these words: We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.<sup>vii</sup> Love is about self-sacrifice. It's about putting the other ahead of the self. It's about setting aside my agenda and my plan in order to be fully present with the other. Jesus exemplified this in his death, but not just in his death. He exemplified this kind of self-sacrificing love every time he touched the untouchable and ate with the unclean, every time he surrounded himself with those whose presence would cost him position and power and even life itself.

I think when we listen to someone – really listen to them – we are practicing Jesus’ kind of self-sacrificing love. We are prioritizing the other person’s words and ideas over our own. Instead of coming into the conversation intent only on saying what we need or want to say, we come intent on hearing the other – on understanding the other.

Can you imagine what our world would be like if we went into all our interactions with that kind of attitude? Can you imagine how much less hate and violence there would be if we were all more interested in hearing the other than in being heard ourselves? How much less screaming would there be if we were all truly committed to listening?

In this week’s *Looking to Sunday* article,<sup>viii</sup> I commented that as I was thinking about the connection between listening and love, I was reminded of the Apostle Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

It’s a passage of scripture that’s maybe too familiar. It used to be used all the time for weddings. But I think it’s worth spending some time with this morning. Because I think that as we unpack the Apostle’s words about love, we will see that listening is so completely intertwined with all the descriptors he uses, that it is impossible to truly love as Jesus loved – as we are commanded to love – if we’re not committed to listening.

Before going into the passage, we need to know a little bit about the people to whom this letter was written.

The Corinthians weren’t doing a very good job of loving each other. They were fighting. There were lawsuits between members of the church. They were divided into cliques who claimed affiliation with different Christian leaders. They were divided by their wealth (or their lack of wealth). When they gathered for the Lord’s Supper, they made it just a regular supper. It wasn’t even a potluck. People ate and drank what they brought, and they didn’t bother to share with those who didn’t have anything. They were competing all the time – not just about who they followed, but about who had the best spiritual gifts, even. They ranked spiritual gifts and claimed that some people were better than others because of the spiritual gifts they had. So, before we get to this passage in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul has been talking to them about spiritual gifts. He reminded them that we’re all part of the body and all the gifts are necessary.

And so Paul seeks to remind them, not just that they’re supposed to love each other, but he reminds them what love actually is. Coming out of a whole section in which he reminds them that all the spiritual gifts are necessary, he writes this in chapter 13, beginning at verse 1: If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. In other words, all my words, all my speaking in tongues are nothing but noise if I do not love.

When I think about the connection between listening and love, it seems to me that it’s made clear right off the top. If there’s no love, everything is just noise. But if there is love, then we can hear what’s being said. As an experiment, I replaced the word *love* with *listen*. It’s not that I think the two are synonymous. Love is a way bigger word, with way more meaning, than listening. But if the two are as intertwined as I suspect they are, then wouldn’t it make sense that the meaning won’t change if we make the substitution? What do you think? Have a listen.

<sup>1</sup>If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not listen, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all the mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not listen, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I can boast [he's talking about being martyred], but do not listen, I gain nothing.

If there's no love, everything is just noise.

At verse 4, he shifts to a series of short statements – short descriptors of love. As we go through them, consider their connection to listening.

Love is patient. So is listening. Good listening means allowing the other person to go at their own pace. It means not interrupting with your own thoughts and words until you've truly heard the other.

Love is kind. So is listening. One of the kindest things we can do is truly listen to another human being.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Again, if we truly listen to the other, we are seeking to understand. Envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness... none of these contribute to understanding. All of these are about me, but listening requires that I be about you.

Love does not insist on its own way. Again, neither does listening, because listening is about you, not me.

Love is not irritable or resentful. Irritability and resentment are all about me. Listening is all about the other person.

Love does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in truth. This one is a bit tricky. We are supposed to be people of truth. But a key attribute of good listening is that it's not judgmental. So if the other person is celebrating some wrong they've done, is it possible to be a good listener without celebrating alongside them? I think maybe it is.

I don't think non-judgmental listening means we agree with everything that's said. I think it means we seek to understand. We ask questions and we focus on the other person in order to understand the other person. If we listen well, the other person may actually invite us to speak and may be open to listening to us as we are supposed to be listening to them. It's about waiting for the invitation to speak. It's about putting ourselves in a position to listen (not in a judgmental way), but it doesn't mean we're affirming everything the other person says, but we are listening to what is said – we are listening to understand. I think maybe that's what dialogue is. I come in, seeking to understand what you think, what you believe in, what motivates you, who you are... And then you, in turn, seek to understand and to listen in the same way. That's real dialogue.

But today we're not focusing on what other people should do for us; we're focusing on what we should be doing for others, which is the listening part of dialogue. Because until we get that right, what we say won't be heard. When I think of all the clanging cymbals and gongs – all the noise that's out there – everybody yelling and screaming and speaking... no one's listening.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I think it might be stretching it to try and substitute listening for love here. I think it's more likely we'll be able to put up with – bear – all things if we're truly listening to people. Because true listening is about understanding. And we can put up with a lot more when we understand a person than when we don't.

But believing and hoping and enduring all things?

I think if we are committed to listening for understanding, it's not going to make us gullible – it doesn't mean we're going to believe everything that comes out of the other person's mouth, but maybe we will be less inclined to judge and condemn people. And maybe if we're less inclined to judge and condemn people, we'll be more inclined to believe and hope and endure?

The reality is that listening and love are not the same thing. But listening is one of the ways we love. It's one of the ways we fulfill Jesus' command to love one another. It's one of the best ways to love our enemies. And if there's going to be any hope for the church – not just our church, but the church in general – it's going to be because we take a break from talking and start listening; it's going to be because we care more about understanding others than about being understood ourselves.

I don't think it's possible to overemphasize the importance of listening. If all we did for the next 6 months was practice listening, it would be time well spent. If there is going to be hope for our future as a church, it's going to be in part because we are committed to listening to each other and to those who aren't part of Walmer.

If we aren't listening, we aren't loving. And if we aren't loving, we aren't following Jesus. That's how important this skill of listening is. Because listening is one of the ways we love. And we have been commanded by Jesus to be people who love.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:35-43

<sup>iii</sup> John 5:2-9

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 18:18-25

<sup>v</sup> Craig Springer. *How to Revive Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 61.

<sup>vi</sup> John 13:34-35

<sup>vii</sup> 1 John 3:16

<sup>viii</sup> This article is published in our weekly email, [This Week at Walmer](#). It is also available on our [website](#) on the same page as you can find the audio recording of this sermon.