

LISTENING IS FOR LOVERS

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Song of Solomon 2:8-16; James 1:17-27

“...let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

James 1:19-20

The story I’m about to tell you is true. It happened in my high school: but long before I was a student there. I heard it from one of my teachers, who’d been around at the time.

Now, this will tell you how old the story is. It goes back to the time when the opening exercises in Toms River High School — a public school — used to begin with a Bible reading. That was the routine each morning: a reading from the Bible, a prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and then announcements. All this was broadcast over the school’s p.a. system.

What do you remember about the opening exercises in *your* high school? Chances are, what you remember is how boring they were. There you sat in your homeroom, half asleep, when you’d hear a crackle over the p.a. system speaker, followed by someone tapping on the microphone, and then those words that were oh-so-familiar. *Ho-hum. Opening exercises. Let’s get it over with.*

That’s the way it usually was: until one particular morning.

The Principal used to ask a different student each week to read from the Bible, then lead the school in the Pledge of Allegiance. The student was given free rein to pick the daily Bible reading.

It was already Tuesday or Wednesday of that particular week, before some students began to realize what was going on. They sat up, at their homeroom desks, and began to pay close attention to the words they were hearing from the venerable King James Version:

**“How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince’s daughter!
The joints of thy thighs are like jewels...
Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor;
thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies.
Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.
Thy neck is like a tower of ivory...”**

The effect of those words, I’m told, on a schoolful of adolescents first thing in the morning, was, shall we say....memorable. It was so memorable, the teachers were still talking about it, more than a decade later.

There’s more to the story. By order of the Principal himself, the student reader was instantly sacked, in the middle of the week — despite his fervent protests that all he’d been doing was reading from the Bible! From that day forward (until the Supreme Court banned prayer in public schools), students at Toms River High School read Bible passages chosen by the Principal.

Dangerous stuff, those Bible verses!

The prankster, of course, was reading from the Song of Solomon — that sensuous love-poem, sandwiched in between the stern philosophy of Ecclesiastes and the soaring prophecies of Isaiah.

To generations of Christians, the Song of Solomon — or the “Song of Songs,” as it's sometimes called — has been a kind of embarrassment. It's one of only two books in the Bible (the other one is Esther) that don't mention God, not even once!

Back in the Middle Ages, Bible scholars went to elaborate lengths to interpret this book as highly symbolic. Some taught that this florid love poetry was really about the soul's relationship to God. Others — and I find this truly remarkable — claimed it was about God's love for the virgin Mary. If (say these Medieval scholars), while reading the Song of Songs, you think you're hearing lovers sighing to each other in a moonlit glade....then think again. When you hear the woman's voice crooning, **“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine...,”** all this is a kind of secret code for an earnest and devout — and thoroughly respectable — piety.

If you believe that one, I've got a bridge to sell you: real cheap. What possible reason could the author have for hiding religious sentiment behind steamy

love-poetry?

I think we need to take the Song of Solomon at face value. It's a joyous celebration of committed love — in every aspect, including the physical — as a wonderful and perfect gift of God.

But still, something about the Song of Solomon makes us feel uneasy. This has, I think, as much to do with our society as with the book itself.

Our society, you see, has a tendency to portray human love in one of only two ways. Love is either idealized and spiritual, or it's erotic and physical — and never the twain shall meet. On the one hand, you've got lacy valentine hearts and bouquets of roses; on the other, there's pornography. One extreme, according to our culture, is good; the other bad. There's no middle ground.

The typical couple, on their wedding day, receive a colossal mixed message (have you ever thought of this?). They go from the church (where they've heard love extolled as a purely spiritual gift), to the reception-hall (where frequently they're treated to an off-color toast by the best man, before going through the degrading ritual of tossing the garter).

The Song of Solomon knows no such separation between the physical and the spiritual. **“Endless seas and floods, torrents and rivers,”** the poet writes,

“cannot put out love’s infinite fires.” He sees no need to construct a wall between the spiritual and the physical; to him, they are two sides of the same coin.

So what’s a preacher to do with the Song of Solomon, this raciest book in the Bible? Well, this preacher’s going to look first at the New Testament lesson for the day, and discover there a principle for interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the wonderful things about the lectionary — those readings recommended for each Sunday — is how often they have these kinds of links between them.

James 1:19 says “...let everyone be quick to listen.” If there’s one thing the two impassioned lovers of the Song of Songs have elevated to a fine art, it’s the act of listening to one another. Listen to this poetic, modern translation:

**“The sound of my lover
coming from the hills
quickly, like a deer
upon the mountains.**

**Now at my windows,
walking by the walls,
here at the lattices
he calls --**

**Come with me,
my love,
come away...”**

The woman whose voice we hear is listening attentively for her lover: every thought, every action is attuned to his return. When she hears the sound of his

eager footstep, and then, moments later, his voice, **“Come with me, my love, come away,”** her heart thrills within her.

James advises everyone to "be quick to listen" — but for a pair of ardent lovers, listening to one another is a given. Listening is one thing lovers do especially well, so attuned are they to their partner's very heartbeat.

Listening comes easy, when love is new. Yet, as the years go by, and loving relationships — be they marriage or friendship — mature, what becomes of the listening?

It's so easy for married couples, in particular, to become like the one portrayed in a certain magazine cartoon. The husband is reading aloud from his newspaper: “Honey, it says here that one of the reasons for marital problems is that couples don't really listen to each other.”

Then. you look over at where the wife ought to be sitting, and you see an empty chair! Turns out, she got up and walked out of the room some time ago, but her husband never noticed. Such are the perils of a love that's no longer new.

Listening is, in fact, one of the greatest gifts you or I can give to those we love — or to anyone else, for that matter. There is a universal human need to be listened to — and for those who find themselves suddenly bereft of listeners, life

becomes tedious indeed.

I know that all too well, from my visits to hospitals and nursing homes. Often, patients lie in their beds in intensive care, draped with tangled tubes, surrounded by beeping monitors: but no one comes by to listen to them. Oh, the nurses are on the job — intensive care nurses are wonderful. They're in and out to change I.V.s and administer medication. The doctors drop by every once in a while, to scan the chart and issue new orders. Doctors and nurses may ask patients the occasional question about physical comfort, or whether the water-pitcher's full: but they don't have time, amidst all their pressing duties, to sit down and really listen.

The problem's even more pronounced in nursing homes. In some understaffed facilities, it's possible for patients to go for days, even weeks, without significant human conversation, beyond the level of survival needs. This is especially true if their roommate isn't well enough to speak; or is suffering from dementia.

In visiting patients in hospitals and nursing homes, I've found that listening is the most precious one I can give. Truly, it's a divine gift; it comes not from us, but from God. James says, in today's passage, **“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of**

lights....”

You and I listen to others because we have first been listened to. Jesus says, **“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”**

When we pray, God listens. Because God hears *us*, we’re set free to listen to others.

On the purely human level, listening is a wonderfully easy gift to give: anyone can do it. Once you discover how, as writer Fran Lebowitz has said, “The opposite of talking isn’t listening...[but] waiting,” all you need do is open the space and the time, and the other person will fill it, eagerly. A bumper sticker puts it even more succinctly: **“WHEN I LISTEN, PEOPLE SPEAK.”**

The late psychologist Carl Rogers was an expert at attentive listening. The non-directive school of psychotherapy he developed is all about waiting, reflecting, opening a gracious space for patients to share what’s on their hearts. Here’s what he has to say about the experience:

“Hearing has consequences. When I truly hear a person and the meanings that are important to him at that moment, hearing not simply his words, but him...many things happen. There is first of

all a grateful look. He feels released..... Almost always, when a person realizes he has been deeply heard, his eyes moisten. I think in some real sense he is weeping for joy. It is as though he were saying, ‘Thank God, somebody heard me. Someone knows what it’s like to be me.’”¹

One of the marvelous aspects of being in love is precisely that feeling of being heard — the certainty that someone else “knows what it's like to be me.” I think this is what Adam is saying in Genesis 2, when he exclaims, upon casting eyes on Eve for the first time, **“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”**

The Song of Solomon simply revels in this sort of attention — this exuberant recognition and naming of the other. To the woman, her beloved’s eyes are **“like doves, afloat upon the water”**; his cheeks are **“like beds of spices, banks of flowers”**; his legs are **“set in gold...two marble columns.”** When the man turns to describe his beloved, he sings the praises of her hair, which is **“black as goats, winding down the slopes;”** her teeth, **“a flock of sheep rising from the stream in twos,”** her forehead, **“a gleam of pomegranate.”**

This rich cascade of metaphors (some of them rather odd), tumbling down

¹Carl Ransom Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995), 10.

one upon the other, sounds almost ridiculous after a while — but who ever said two people in love are the picture of dignity? The point is, lovers demonstrate for one another a high degree of very focused attention; and it is this attention that makes love wondrously renewing.

“Let everyone be quick to listen,” says James. The couple in the Song of Solomon has no trouble doing that!

There’s an old legend out of Africa, about a tribe whose custom it was for the men to purchase their wives with livestock. If a woman were especially beautiful, a man might offer her father five goats; if she were plain, only one or two.

There was one young man, who — when the tribe met at the oasis for their annual gathering — set his eye upon one rather ordinary-looking maiden. To the astonishment of all his friends, he went up to her father and bid the princely sum of ten goats. Surprised and delighted with his unexpected good fortune, the father accepted; and the two were married straightaway.

A year went by, and as the tribe gathered at the oasis once again, the young men laughed and pointed their fingers at their friend, newly arrived from the hills. “And how is your ten-goat bride?” they asked, snickering behind his back.

Then, at that very moment, into their presence walked the most lovely woman any of them had ever seen. “Don’t you recognize the woman I married?” their friend asked.

Truly, they had not recognized her. She had changed. What had changed about her was the knowledge that her husband loved her so much that he’d paid ten goats for her. It was this knowledge of her husband’s attention that had made her beautiful.

In the very same way, the gift of listening — the gift of precious time, offered to another person in love — ascribes worth. It is this sense of self-worth — more than any jewelry, cosmetic or diet — that makes a person beautiful.

An even more poignant story is told by the surgeon and author, Dr. Richard Selzer. I’m just going to let him tell it in his own words:

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each

other so generously, greedily?

The young woman speaks. ‘Will my mouth always be like this?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘it will. It is because the nerve was cut.’

She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles.

‘I like it,’ he says. ‘It’s kind of cute.’

All at once I *know* who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”²

*“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine...”*

Let us pray:

We give you thanks, O God,
that you are the Word.
In the beginning was that Word,
spoken into the silence before creation,
into the darkness before there even was darkness.
And we give you thanks
that the word you spoke into that eternal silence was love.
We give you thanks, as well,
that — in the fullness of time — you sent your son, Jesus.
You sent him to preside at that table where he said,

²Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1996), 45-46.

**“Take, eat, this is my body which is for you.”
“For you,” he said. *For us.*
To us he listens. And for us he offers up his very life.
Can we not, then, also,
in pale imitation of that precious gift,
offer to our neighbor a listening ear?
By your power, O Lord, make it so. Amen.**

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