Andrew Warner
Ebenezer UCC, Sheboygan
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The Generosity of Listening

I serve with the Wisconsin Conference staff as the Director of Development and in a similar role with the national setting of the United Church of Christ. I see everyday the impact of generosity. The way the gifts of this congregation through Our Churches Wider Mission impact people near and far. Because of you, a nearby congregation gets the assistance they need finding a new minister, people called to theological exploration can go to lay academy, and communities around the country can be inspired by a progressive vision of our faith. Your gifts to Our Churches Wider Mission change lives. Thank you for your support.

Now here in Wisconsin, I'm part of a team of twelve people. It doesn't take much imagination to go: twelve apostles, twelve staff members, which one am I?

You might imagine our Conference Minister Franz Rigert as Peter; and perhaps our Associate Conference Ministers like Jane Anderson as other key apostles like James and John. But which apostle might I be?

I'm the money guy; and among the apostles, Judas took charge of the common purse. Does that mean that on the staff I play the part of Judas?

Often in congregations people get uncomfortable with talk about money. I sometimes hear, "we just want to be spiritual!" It's always an interesting comment, because it assumes money can't be a spiritual question (or a spiritual problem). Which is odd, because Jesus talked a lot about money and wealth.

Perhaps Judas is why we're suspicious about money people. Judas sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Perhaps we worry that budget committee chairs, finance people, and especially development folks will betray the mission too.

Regardless of our discomfort, I'm committed to reclaiming generosity as one of our central spiritual practices. Generosity lies at the heart of our faith – "For God so loved the world" – and behind our deepest questions – "what can I do to follow you?"

I like to begin with a broad definition of generosity that comes from Christian Smith, who describes it this way:

> "Generosity… involves giving not just anything, but rather those things that are good for others. What exactly generosity gives can vary: money, possessions, time, attention, aid,

encouragement, emotional availability, and more. But it always intends to enhance the true wellbeing of the receiver."

I appreciate the way Smith expands our understanding of generosity beyond just money. Generosity includes all that we give if it benefits the person who receives it. I might summarize this definition of generosity as the giving of ourselves in ways that benefit another. Which sounds like discipleship to me.

Understanding generosity this way causes me to hear scriptural stories in new ways; in fact, to hear them as stories about generosity.

Today we heard the Transfiguration story read; but I want you to listen to it as a story about the call to generosity. I imagine this story as a dramatic show, a bit of Glee Club in the Gospels. According to Mark, Jesus' face changed – we can only imagine how - and his clothes became dazzling white. Now I've watched enough musical theater to know what it means when the lights change and cloths start to sparkle. Song and dance time. On cue, two backup singers show up with Jesus: Moses and Elijah, basically celebrity cameos in the Jesus show. As the song reached a high point, Peter stumbled in with an awkward comment that brought everything to a screeching halt. In eerie silence, the fog machine pumped out a thick cloud as everyone looked away from Peter. The director yelled from backstage, "Jesus is my star. Listen to him!"

However we imagine the scene, I want us to pay attention to that closing line of God, "This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

That line most stands out to me in the story: "Listen to him." At previous times in my spiritual journey, I heard that command as connected to Jesus' divinity - God telling the disciples - and by extension us - to listen to Jesus because of his holiness. That message still exists in this story. But over the years, life caused me to find another message in the text: the call to listen to Jesus as a person and, by extension, for us to listen to other people too. What might change in our lives if we practiced the generosity of listening?

The call to listen becomes painfully necessary because, of course, the disciples did everything but listen. The Gospels often portray Peter as the overeager disciple who didn't quite get it; the Peter who saw Jesus walk on water so he jumped overboard and tried it himself. And often his bumbling comment about making three structures, booths, gets lumped into Peter's awkward eagerness.

But I see it as something else. Jesus stood talking with Moses and Elijah. Instead of listening, Peter interrupted. Why did he interrupt? Because, "he did not know what to say for they were terrified." And what did he interrupt? Jesus speaking about his upcoming death - his "departure" as other versions of this story delicately put it.

Just before the scene of the Transfiguration, Jesus tried to talk about his impending death to the disciples. (It didn't take divine powers of prediction to guess that his rabble-rousing group

proclaiming release to the captives and justice to the poor would end up in trouble with the authorities.) As Jesus spoke his mind that time, naming his fears of suffering and death, Peter also interrupted, took him aside, and said, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Peter couldn't listen to Jesus talk about his death. And so, whenever the conversation turned to this, Peter interrupted. He couldn't listen to Jesus' pain. At the beginning of our reading, Peter interrupted by telling Jesus not to talk that way. At the Transfiguration, he interrupted with an off-topic solution to a problem no one faced.

Peter tried to silence Jesus' pain. Which makes the imperative voice from heaven even more clear: "Listen to him!"

Of course, James and John didn't do any better. The sons of thunder - as they were known - didn't rumble when Jesus spoke. But did they listen to what he said? Their silence may seem like listening, but after the Transfiguration, down the mountain, word spread among the disciples that Jesus would die. And what did they do? Start arguing among themselves about who would take charge next, casting lots for his mantle of leadership.

James and John went one further than the disciples, though. They took Jesus aside, to ask, "When you come into your kingdom" - that is, when you die - "can we sit at your right and your left?" - that is, can you make us your successors? How it pained Jesus to have his closest disciples not listen to him. I hear that in his reply, "You do not know what you ask."

Have you had those moments in your life? Those moments when you just want to be listened to? But instead, someone interrupts because they can't listen to your pain? Offering to solve a problem when you just want to be heard? Or have you been the one who struggles to listen? Discomfort getting in the way of your ability to attend to what someone says?

One of my mentors, Rodney, once told a story about his own trouble listening. He suffered a bad ear infection. It punctured his eardrum. Rodney's doctor sent him to a specialist to evaluate the impact on his hearing.

After the test, Rodney asked the technician how he did. "Slightly above average for a 45-year old man," she replied. He smiled. "Isn't that interesting," he said, "Now I have scientific proof that my wife and daughter are wrong. They think I'm getting hard of hearing."

The technician didn't smile. Perhaps she knew a man like Rodney. "There is a difference between hearing and listening." How true. Our ears may work fine, but we can still be hard of listening.

The disciples were certainly hard of listening. Jesus spoke. But they didn't listen. Jesus said he would die; Peter couldn't bear to listen.

I want you to think of a moment when someone truly, deeply listened to you. A time when you could share your thoughts or your silences and be understood.

As I think about those times in my life, a few common characteristics become clear. The person listened with curiosity instead of advice. Curious about what I thought, curious about what I would say, curious about what I felt. All of which is different from the quickness to advice, the discomfort which changes the subject, or the defensiveness in which we get stuck. The curious listener, that's a gift.

Even in an argument, curiosity turns the tone of the conversation. Judgment proclaims, "How can you think that!" But curiosity wants to know, "Why do you think that?"

Relatedly, the people who've most listened to me, listen because they don't know the answer. Do you know what I mean? Sometimes it seems like someone is listening, but then you find they're just waiting to give you their answer: to tell you what to do, ready to fix a problem you haven't begun to describe. But true listeners listen because they don't know the solution. Instead of waiting to answer, they wonder and wait. Which might be why good listeners are often so good with silences. Wonder emerges in silence like stars in the dark sky.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus spoke of his impending death. None of the disciples ever asked him what it felt like to foresee his death. None of them asked what it felt like to walk closer and closer to Jerusalem. None if he was angry at God.

God called the disciples back to their senses; "Listen to him." And learning to listen can transform our relationships.

Pastor Michael Mather from Indianapolis tells a story of how listening changed his congregation. Michael serves a congregation much like this one, a congregation committed to showing the love of Jesus in concrete, real ways.

Michael's congregation long ran a food pantry that provided food assistance to people in need. A government grant supported the program. And the grant required Michael's church to ask a series of questions about the poverty of the people they served.

One evening, church members gathered for a Bible Study. As they talked about the passage – I don't remember which one – they noted how it spoke to treating people with dignity. One of the women in the study said, "but we don't do that to the people coming to us for help." The group talked about the way they focused on people's poverty, all that people didn't have. They imagined a new way to listen to the people coming to the church.

Michael's church started asking three questions. Now they still had to ask the questions mandated by the grant but these new questions changed the conversation. They asked questions filled with wonder:

- What three things do you do well enough that you could teach them to someone else?
- What three things would you like to learn that you don't already know?
- Who besides God and me [the interviewer] is going to go with you along the way?

These questions opened a new world into the lives of people. Instead of focusing on someone's poverty – on what they didn't have – the congregation listened for people's wisdom, curiosity, and relationships. They moved from hearing about poverty to listening for soul.

Through these questions, they learned that Adele – a woman who'd received food assistance for some time – knew how to cook amazing Mexican food. She fed three generations in her house. And so, the next time the church needed a caterer, they hired Adele. Fantastic food. So, they hired her for another event. And then introduced her to leaders in the local chamber of commerce, which lead to a small loan, so that Adele could open a catering business, which grew into a café, all of which lifted her out of poverty, just because someone stopped to listen.

Michael Mather and his congregation changed lives because they listened. Not just the live of Adele; but also, their own lives because they shifted from seeing streets of poverty to a community of possibility. And that's how generosity works – we give something good that benefits another and it changes our lives too, opening up a world of possibilities.

Generosity changes lives. The generosity of listening, which God called us to in the text, and every act of generosity can change us.

Alleluia and Amen.