

## *Listen!*

Feast of the Transfiguration, August 5-6, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

*Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. Luke 9:28-36*

Once when our son Eliot was only four years old, I needed to get his attention for something I thought was important. "Eliot," I said. No answer. And then a little louder, "Eliot!" Still no answer. And then a third time, "Eliot!!" and still no answer.

In frustration, I said, "Hey! Am I talking to a wall, or what?"

Many weeks later, we were on vacation, on a long drive on the West Coast. Eliot was in the far back seat of a rented van. I was driving. "Dad," he said. No answer. And then a little louder, "Dad!" Still no answer. And then a third time, "Dad!!" and still no answer. You must know what came next. In exasperation, Eliot said, "Hey! Am I talking to a wall, or what?"

Apparently, Eliot and I are not alone in our lapses in listening, or our selective listening, and sometimes our inability to listen. The theme runs throughout the Bible, and an Englishman named Julian Treasure argues that in our own time and circumstances, we humans are rapidly losing many of our capacities for listening. Treasure could be partly described as a listening coach. His personal mission seems to be helping others to recapture the gifts and disciplines of intentional listening and the pure wonder, delight and significance of all we may receive only by listening.

Julian Treasure suggests that the growing extinction of listening in our time has diverse causes. We have less and less need to listen carefully because more and more of what we hear is recorded and can later be retrieved. The "*premium on accurate and careful listening has simply disappeared,*"<sup>1</sup> he says. Also, as the world becomes noisier we tune out more and more. The stereo is playing over the sound of the dishwasher and trains and we're talking on the phone ... and we tune out the song of a migrating finch, the distant

church bell, rain on the window. Treasure's analysis makes the preacher queasy. "We're becoming impatient," he says. "We don't want oratory anymore, we want sound bites."

Maybe you already noticed the feature of listening in today's gospel story about the Transfiguration of Jesus. Arguably, it's the main point of the story. But if you missed it, who could blame you? There's a lot of drama here: Jesus' garments become blindingly bright, Moses and Elijah miraculously appear, Peter suggests an odd building project, and then the portentous cloud that terrifies the disciples. And only after all of that the voice comes from the cloud: "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*"

Listen.

Listen to him.

But how do we listen? And how do we listen in particular to God's Chosen, Jesus?

Different Christian traditions emphasize listening to Christ, and listening for Christ, by way of markedly different spiritual practices: the Jesus Prayer, sitting before icons, the rosary, silence, the Daily Office, personal or group retreats, Bible study, sacred music, and more. We Anglicans generally believe we are free to explore and discover and then to pursue those spiritual practices that best grow and express our faith.

A key measure of any genuine spiritual practice, thought, will be those that tune our listening hearts and minds and wills to Christ. We are listening for his presence, often as a lost soul might listen for a buoy in the fog at night. We are listening for Christ's loving but chastening summons when we fail him, ourselves or one another. We are listening for Christ's call to sacrificially serve particular people in particular circumstances at a particular time.

"*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*"

Julian Treasure doesn't present as a 'spiritual teacher,' but many of his ideas about listening may be of help to us, whatever our spiritual practices. One example would be his thoughts about what he calls different postures of listening. He doesn't mean literal body postures – however valuable these may be in some of our spiritual practices. He is suggesting that some circumstances in life call for listening is that is reductive – we seek to extract a specific, narrow meaning or fact or conclusion from an undulating sea of data. At other times the best listening should be expansive, opening our imaginations, encouraging dreams and questions and 'what ifs'.

"*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*" What posture might best enable you or me to do that now?

In one Julian Treasure presentation to which I listened, he said, "*When I married my wife, I promised her that I would listen to her every day as if for the first time.*" What would it be like, I wonder, what difference would it make and for whom, for you or me to make that commitment to God's Chosen, Jesus? *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> TED Talk: "Five ways to listen better," TEDGlobal, July 2011