

In Deep Listening, There Is Hope

B Lent 6, Palm Sunday--Is 50:4-9a; Mk 11:1-11, 14:32-15:39

According to a much-referenced (if potentially apocryphal) story, a reporter was once interviewing Mother Theresa. "When you pray," he asked, "what do you say to God?" She said, "Nothing. I listen." "Well, as you listen, what does God say to you?" "God doesn't say anything. He listens back."

Our passage from Isaiah today invites us to ponder this act of listening and its relationship to speech and action. In that passage, the figure of the Suffering Servant--whose Old Testament identity is unclear, but whom Christians often consider to prefigure Jesus--is given the "tongue of a teacher" to "sustain the weary with a word." This ability to speak a sustaining word, in turn, seems to arise directly out of the servant's listening. God "wakens" his ear each morning, he says, "to listen as those who were taught." So the teacher listens as a student, and because he listens, he does not rebel against or "turn backward" from his enemies but faces into their abuse, grounded in his relationship with God. You might say he accomplishes a spiritually mature response to ill-treatment, refusing to pay it back or to pay it forward, refusing to allow it to cause him to become like his enemies. His power and his identity are born out of a profound and deep listening.

So it is with Jesus, who shoulders the mantle of Isaiah's Suffering Servant in our gospel readings today. And looking back through the gospel, it is clear that Jesus' profound and deep listening is one of the qualities which brings him so many followers, especially among those who typically do *not* experience such listening in their lives. You

know, most of us live in the cultural values of our time the way fish swim through water: unconsciously. But Jesus has this profound ability to listen past those cultural values, past those trappings, to the very essence of a person's humanity. For example, he differentiates between illnesses and those who suffer from them, unlike his culture, thus bringing dignity and healing to the sufferers. He also eats with tax collectors, whose jobs make them cultural pariahs to the people of first-century Judea. He treats women, whom his culture barely acknowledges as people, with dignity and respect. He even listens to the Syro-Phoenician mother, and although she "doesn't matter" culturally because she is not a Jew, he heals her daughter. Over and over again, in story after story, Jesus listens to and heals people whom his culture treats as garbage. His listening breaks all the rules and frustrates all the boundaries that separate people from each other. And because he listens so profoundly, because he earns the trust and faith of so many, when he does speak, he is able to provide a "word" of justice and hope that "sustains the weary" in their struggle.

This power of listening, which Jesus models and to which Isaiah points, takes its most profound form in the story of Jesus' passion, which we will experience at the end of today's service. When we do, you may notice that, although Jesus is the center of the account, once he has been arrested he actually says very little. What does he do? Mostly, he listens. He listens to the accusations against him. He listens to his own trial. He listens to the jeering of the crowds (who just a short time earlier, as we heard at the beginning of our service, were cheering his entry into Jerusalem with jubilant shouts of "Hosanna!") He doesn't condemn anyone. He doesn't defend anything. He really makes only two significant statements the entire time: one affirming that he is the messiah, and

the other one, at the end, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The rest of the time, he listens.

What does this mean for us? Well for one thing, it means that when we listen, we are participating in this holy act that forms the core of Jesus' ministry. It means that this kind of listening takes part in the suffering and resurrection of the one who himself listened to ordinary people, so deeply and with such humanity that it scared powerful people into killing him. It means that listening to one another, truly receiving each other's stories in all their humanity, has a healing power.

I got a taste of this healing power myself last week during a monthly, diocesan clergy meeting that I attend. Now, official meetings like this often have a slightly guarded quality. Maybe there's an odd competitiveness among priests who feel they need to put their best foot forward around the bishop's staff, I don't know. But this last meeting was different. At this last meeting, people started to talk, really talk, about what it was like to minister to a shrinking church in a tanking economy. The hopelessness we encounter among parishioners. The struggle to meet increasing needs on decreasing resources. The peculiar isolation of the clergy life, out there in the trenches and often a long drive from the support of colleagues. We left the day's agenda behind and just came together and talked and listened. Several people wept. It was truly sacred time. And even though nothing had been solved when it was over, no exterior circumstance had been changed, there was a palpable air in that room of peace and hope.

I don't know how this can be. I don't know why speaking despair and listening to despair can bring hope, but it can. Even in Jesus' last words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" even in this cry of utter abandonment there is a seed of hope, for

the cry in fact quotes the first line of Psalm 22. That psalm begins in despair, with the psalmist helpless, attacked by his enemies. But it ends with a promise of deliverance by God who, the psalmist writes, "did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

So really, this teaching for our lives could not be more clear. Listen deeply, to each other, and to God. For in deep listening, there is a word that will sustain the weary. In deep listening, there is hope.