



“Active Listening”

May 26, 2019

Acts 16: 9-15

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The other night during a lively conversation at the dinner table, as we were all vying for a turn to talk, Nicole, the youngest member of our family, who is sometimes at a disadvantage in this dynamic, remembered the technique her teacher uses in these kinds of situations.

Call and response! Teachers are masters of this technique meant to quiet a chaotic classroom so everyone will listen.

The teacher calls out: “One, two, three, eyes on me.”

The class responds: “One, two, eyes on you.”

And they listen!

Nicole’s teacher, Ms. Kelley, evidently has a whole collection of these:

One: Cotton candy, lolly pop

All: We were talking, we should stop!

One: And a hush fell over the crowd

All: HUSH!!

Or the traditional African call and response:

One: Ago (ah-go)

All: Ame (ah-may)

Which simply means:

One: Are you listening?

All: We are listening!

Try it with me:

One: Ago!

All: Ame!

Sometimes it takes a good technique to get us to listen. Our scripture lesson today is about listening. Actually, I think it is about call and response, and listening.

I have to admit, I didn't realize this the first time I read the passage. At first I was more interested in who this woman, Lydia, might have been. I was interested in the fact that she was a dealer in purple cloth. It is one of the few details we get that tells us about her and the people she was used to dealing with. Purple cloth is a signifier that Lydia was likely a wealthy person, and she was most certainly used to dealing with wealthy people — the only ones who could afford and were allowed to wear the purple cloth she sold.

For our alter preparations this morning, I mentioned “purple cloth.” Donna Perry and Pat Ameling visually interpreted that detail beautifully for our worship space. I especially like the way they interpreted this because to me it has a contemplative feeling that draws me into the more subtle theme of this story — which is listening.

The way the story goes, Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, are setting out on another voyage into new territory to spread the gospel message of Jesus, after Jesus had died. They are the evangelists. They have something to say, a message to deliver, a word to speak. They are looking for someone to share it with, someone who will listen. They have a call. Who will respond?

But, before they can even find an audience who will listen to them, it turns out they have to do some listening themselves. They start out in one direction toward Asia — but the scripture says the Holy Spirit forbid them to speak there. (16: 6) Then they try a different direction— but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there. (16:7) Then in the night Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come to help him. (16:9) They interpret the vision as a clarion call from God to go to Macedonia to “proclaim the good news”; and they go. God calls, they listen, and they respond.

Here's a little historical context for reference. Macedonia is the easternmost part of Greece. Paul is traveling the reverse course that Alexander the Great had travelled three centuries earlier. Alexander the Great went *from* Macedonia bringing Greek culture and language to the wider world. Paul reverses this route traveling *to* Macedonia bringing the gospel message to the heart of Western culture.

As one commentator says, Paul is going “from Judaism’s religious center, into Greece’s intellectual center, and eventually to Rome’s political center.”¹ There is a lot of geography in this passage, but the important thing is that Paul and Silas are spreading the gospel in a new direction. It was not the way they originally thought to go. They seem to have had some false starts, but they stayed tuned in. They listened. Eventually they discerned a call from God and responded.

From the point when Paul has his vision, the voice in this passage shifts from “he” to “we”. “When **he** had seen the vision, **we** immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called **us** to proclaim the good news to them.” The call ripples out. The response is collective. As we hear this story, we are drawn into that plural voice. We are invited to listen and respond. The call is not just to one; it is to many.

We are called. We listen. We respond. We are invited into the faith. We are invited to be the evangelists.

Call and response is not a once and done kind of thing. In this story, when they arrived in Macedonia, it wasn’t exactly as they thought it would be. Paul’s vision had been of a man from Macedonia. It turns out, they met a woman (Lydia) who was in Macedonia, who actually was not from Macedonia. She was from across the Aegean Sea in Thyatira. She was an unlikely person (a wealthy woman) in an unlikely place (outside the gate of the temple by the river) at an unlikely time (on the Sabbath day).

But despite all that unlikelihood, Paul and company went ahead and proclaimed the good news. Paul preached. Now he’s the evangelist. He issued the call. Lydia listened. And she responded! She and her household were baptized! Not only that, she invited these traveling preachers to her home. That was another twist. She says to Paul and the others, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And—believe it or not—she prevailed upon them (16:15). They do go to stay at her home! Now Lydia is the one issuing the call. Now she’s the evangelist. And they respond.

The pattern is the same — call and response. But the voices change. The listening changes. The action changes.

I love this idea that the invitation to faith is a dialogue. It is not a lesson to be learned. It is not a set of rules to memorize. It is not a statement to profess or a ritual to enact (although baptism becomes a marker of faith in this story). Rather, the invitation to faith is a dialogue. It is a dialogue between God and us. It is a dialogue between a person with a vision and a community that interprets that vision. It is a dialogue between Paul, a migrant Jewish man, who was a Roman citizen and Lydia, a wealthy Gentile woman who was the head of her household. They meet in a place that neither claimed as their homeland. The invitation to faith is a dialogue that does not pay attention to hierarchies of power, where all the roles are fluid and different characters play different parts. The invitation to faith is a dialogue — mutual, balanced, nuanced, changing; It is not a one way street.

¹Paul Walaskay, quoted in “The Power of Listening” by Kathryn Matthews, Weekly Seeds, UCC.

God calls, and Paul responds.
Paul calls, and Lydia responds.
Lydia calls, and Paul responds.
And God, keeping up with all this, keeps calling and responding right along with us.
More voices join in. More perspectives. The dialogue gets complicated. The energy rises. All of this calling and responding hums around us, within us. It grows louder and louder. In the cacophony of confusion, we try to make our own voice heard!

Ago!
Ame!

Are you listening? Have we forgotten to listen?

The invitation to faith is a dialogue. Are we so busy crafting our own next word to be the last word, that we are forgetting to listen to anyone else's word? Are we so busy rehearsing our rote responses, like a knee-jerk reflex when the doctor taps us with the hammer, that we are forgetting to listen to what we are hearing? Are we so lost in our own privilege or prejudice or pride that we have forgotten to listen to anyone else's perspective?

Sometimes it seems the invitation to faith, this delicate dialogue of call and response is getting lost in a blast of explosive, indecipherable noise?

What has become of evangelism? Even that word has an uncomfortable ring to it, for many of us. But evangelism simply means: "spreading the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness."

Nonetheless, over many years, for some, evangelism has been accompanied by acts of self-righteous piety, coercive persuasion, violence and exploitation. For some, evangelism has perpetuated biases of superiority that promote one culture or language or gender or interpretation of the gospel to the exclusion of all others. No wonder we recoil.

But if we return to the vision of evangelism in this story, we are drawn back into the dialogue. Paul the evangelist, Lydia the evangelist actively listening to one another, listening to God. Drawing in a community of followers, diverse in every way. Sharing the good news through good words and proclamation. Showing the love of the gospel through good works and hospitality. Call and response. And in between a lot of listening!

Ago!
Ame!

Amen!