



Life Together: Pay Attention

Luke 19:1-10, 45-48

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In 1928, then presidential candidate Hebert Hoover, delivered a campaign speech in which he touted America's "rugged individualism." He offered, "The very essence of equality of opportunity and of American individualism is that there shall be no dominion by any group or [monopoly] in this republic." Admittedly, it's an odd way to ignore that there had been dominion by a group of people in America since its inception. Nonetheless, in his speech, Hoover set up the "rugged individualism" of America against paternalism and state socialism, which he said defined European countries. I'm not sure if this is what our current president intended when he set out to "Make America Great Again;" yet, by intention or not, it seems this rugged individualism is where we have returned – to a place where the individual believes they are more important than the collective whole.

I fear we have misunderstood the intention of individualism in making any entity "great." The success of individualism for any organization – much less an entire nation – does not come from letting each and every person have what they want, or to get what they want by whatever means necessary. Individualism is successful for such an organization only when *each* person is able to live their fullest – to live into their created identity – to be the person whom God has created them to be. When any person – or entire groupings of people – is unable to live fully – to live equally – to have the opportunity to be whom they have been created to be – we have failed God's desire for humanity. We are indeed anything but "great" when individualism leads to some living in such a way that others cannot live.

I have little doubt that part of our challenge as a nation today is that we have placed the health and wealth of each individual above the health and wealth of the collective whole. Maybe that's a definitive point for American life – but it's a far cry from what God declares as our purpose as a people of faith. Yes, in our call to faithfulness, we do invite each *individual* to a personal profession of faith, and a personal understanding of God. But our individual faithfulness is not merely for our own well-being. Our individual faithfulness is part of the call by God to live into our collective *shalom* – our universal well-being. Our purpose as the church is to be part of God's work, renewing and redeeming the world so that each person – every person – all people – might live full, complete, productive, and healthy lives.

We will never get there – not as a church, and certainly not as a nation – until we allow God to redeem our relationships with one another. Our individualism is in need of repentance. We need renewed and reconciled communities. Such a renewal begins in reframing and relearning to be in relationship with one another. How to have more faithful and healthy relationships is our focus of this worship series, which I'm calling, *Life Together*.

Last week, we named that such a renewal begins with gratitude. This week, our focus is on learning to listen to one another attentively.

My senior year of high school, our football team made the state playoffs. In the state quarter-finals, we played at Lowndes County High School. We were the underdog, but managed to pull off the unexpected victory. We were elated, as the semi-final round, to be played the following week, was to be played in the Georgia Dome. As we got into the bus to make the long drive home, one of the coaches got on, gave us a quick congratulations, and then made this declarative statement. I remember his words well, as he said, “Hear me now, listen to me later – next week is going to be unlike any week we’ve had yet. We will be working extra hard on conditioning to prepare for the game next Saturday.” It didn’t sink in until Monday after school what he meant – when we finally listened to his words. We ran more laps around that field than we had ever run before. It was the worst week of conditioning of the entire season, as we prepared to play one of the most exhausting games of our high-school careers. (Sadly, we didn’t win.)

That phrase, “hear me now, listen to me later,” has stuck with me ever sense.

How often do we *hear* what another person has to say, without really listening to them? To understand the difference, Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”ⁱ Perhaps its social media, or the advent of texting, or even the quick quips that date back to the creation of Instant Messaging – but it seems we are no longer listening to one another. We might give someone an ear – we might act as if we care what they have to say – we might even engage with a response, but are we really listening?

Listening – honest listening – selfless listening – redemptive listening – has the power to change lives and communities.

The story of Zacchaeus is well known by most in the church. It’s a story we are taught as little children, as we sing the familiar tune, “Zacchaeus was a wee-little man, a wee-little man was he. He climbed up in the Sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.”

As Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem, one of the last places he travelled through was Jericho. Jericho is not far east of Jerusalem, located in one of the lowest areas of the globe, just north of the Dead Sea. As he entered the village, the streets lined with individuals who wanted to see Jesus walking by. Zacchaeus was there. He was the chief tax collector in the city. As such, the community cared very little for him. He was on the Roman payroll, and his job was to ensure the locals in Jericho, all under Roman oversight, paid their due taxes to the government.

Zacchaeus happened to be a man of short stature. He could not see from the back row of those lining the streets, and because of his disfavor among the locals, he was not being allowed to get to the front. Zacchaeus chose to climb a tree so that he might see over the crowd as Jesus came

walking that way. As Jesus walked by, he stopped and looked up into the tree to see Zacchaeus in his perched location. He called out to Zacchaeus, saying, “Hurry up and come down; I’ll be dining at your house today.”

You might imagine that those in the crowd were a bit surprised. Intentionally or not, they had not allowed Zacchaeus to be in the front where he might be seen by Jesus, and yet, Jesus saw him anyway. Without question, they would have been a bit confused by Jesus’ remarks. Why would this man – this wandering rabbi – this miracle worker – this one who was so highly revered want to dine with such a despised member of the society?

Zacchaeus knew this was not an opportunity to pass up, so he hurried down from the tree to welcome Jesus.

Now, generally, when we hear this story told in the church, we hear this story as one of Jesus’ saving work, followed by Zacchaeus’ redemptive response. It’s a great example of where we hear what we want to hear, without really listening to the story.

I think for many in the church, we want to hear that because of Jesus’ saving work – because of God’s great love exemplified in Jesus Christ – Zacchaeus turned from his wicked ways to become a favored child of God. We want to hear that because we, as sinners ourselves, as those who are from time to time engaged in the crooked business of the government like Zacchaeus, we are also possible of being saved. We hear what we want to hear, that Jesus’ salvific invitation led to Zacchaeus’ repentant response. Yet, we must re-listen to the story.

Verse 8 reads, “Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord ...” Before we hear what he says, let’s make sure we’re paying attention. Listen to the words. Zacchaeus and the Lord haven’t gone anywhere yet. Zacchaeus has just barely gotten himself out of the tree. They are still in the midst of the community, gathered with all of those locals who would have rather kicked Zacchaeus to the curb.

Before we hear what he says, we also have to do a little grammar correcting for our translation, which seeks to tell the story as it wants the story to be heard, not as the story is first told. The verb *give* is going to show up twice in this text. (In the Greek, the word is *didomi*.) In Zacchaeus’ response, the verb shows up both times in the present active tense – meaning, Zacchaeus is not responding to Jesus’ presence by saying *he will give in the future*, Zacchaeus is saying, “I am currently giving ...” Not I will give, but I am giving. It’s an important distinction.

“Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay them back – I give back to them – four times as much.’”

I can’t help but wonder how many times Zacchaeus had tried to tell his story before. I can’t help but think that he was written off by the community because of his occupation, without ever

being given the opportunity to have his story heard. Yet, for all the times those around him failed to hear him, Jesus listens. Listening is redemptive work.

After listening, Jesus responds, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

What happened in that moment was about more than Zacchaeus’s personal transformation. What happened on the street that day was that Zacchaeus finally met someone willing to listen to his story. And when his story was heard – I mean, when someone finally listened to what he had to say – it was not just Zacchaeus who experienced a renewal of life. Jesus says, “salvation has come to this house,” which implies a much broader community. We may, in 21st Century America, think of a house as a simple dwelling unit – but as Jesus spoke, the word *house* implied the whole family – the gathered community – all who shared in communal identity with Zacchaeus. This story is about redemption – but it’s not just a story of Zacchaeus’s redemption, but that of the entire community.

In that moment, we are led to believe that, not only was Zacchaeus welcomed back by the community as a Son of Abraham – a member of the Jewish community in which he lived – but that, in historic Jewish teaching, anytime a member is reunited in the community, the whole of the community becomes more whole. That someone was willing to listen to him, not only gave him new life, but it gave the whole community new life.

Because of our “rugged individualism,” we too often lack the courage to listen to others without scrutinizing them. We don’t agree with someone’s experience and so we write it off without ever considering what their experience might offer to the well-being of the whole. “Listening is attending to reality rather than getting caught up in our own narrow, often self-serving view of things.”ⁱⁱ As if, because I don’t agree with what you say, because it makes me uncomfortable, because what you’re saying doesn’t benefit me, because your story doesn’t further my preferred narrative ... I’m going to ignore you ... or push back against you .. or worse yet, try to discredit you. Instead of listening and learning, I’m going to stick to my own narrative, no matter if it doesn’t help the collective whole.

You know, like, ignoring proven data ... or pushing back on the facts ... or trying to discredit the large majority of science and doctors ... simply because I don’t like that someone else is telling me how to live. Because I believe my individualism lets me ignore your truth, simply because your truth makes me uncomfortable, or asks me to live in a different way.

Jesus leaves Jericho, and finally enters the City of Jerusalem. As he entered the Holy City, he found his way to the Temple. There, he found the Temple had been set up as a place of commodity – where people were selling goods for personal gain. He drove them out of the Temple, saying, “My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.” It seems those who were selling their goods were cheating people with unfair prices – robbing people through merchandising sales.

Having cleaned the Temple, Jesus kept coming back to teach. If you want to know the power of listening, look no further.

The text makes clear, the Temple authorities were not too keen on Jesus' teaching. "The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him." They didn't like what he had to say. They didn't like his story. And yet, they couldn't find a way to kill him, "because all of the people were spellbound by what they heard."

Jesus had a powerful story to tell, and any who took the time to listen – any who took the time to really listen to what he had to teach – were spellbound. His story was a different story – a story of new life – a story of new health – a story of new freedoms and new love. A story of a New Covenant. But the leaders, those whose authority was being questioned, those whose power was being put at risk ... instead of taking the time to listen, they sought a way to shut him up. That's usually what happens when someone has a story to tell that calls for the freeing of the oppressed. They tried to kill him. That's usually what happens when someone's voice seeks to change the power status quo.

If we're going to see change in the world – if we're going to see change even in our own community – we've got to start by listening: listening to the invitation of God that declares the worth of each person; listening to the invitation of Christ that offers freedom to the oppressed; listening to the invitation of the Biblical text to put the well-being of the collective whole above the well-being of any one individual; listening to the voice of those who are crying out for help, seeking to have the knee taken off of their neck, asking for each person to be declared a Child of God, a sibling in the family of the Risen Lord, members of the Blessed Community.

May we not just hear the promise of God, may we listen to the Lord – the promise of God in the glory of Jesus Christ is that we each, and we all, are made in the Creator's image. It's time we tune in, and give attention, that we might not just hear each other in passing – but that we might listen to one another, that we might share in the great communion as we live together as God's people seeking to claim God's kingdom and God's glory. There are plenty of people trying to have their voice heard – crying out from the wilderness for life, for justice, for the opportunity to be seen equally in the eyes of all, just as they are seen in the eyes of the Lord. May God grant us the ears and the heart to listen. Amen.

ⁱ Quentin J. Shultze & Diane M. Badzinski. *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.