

What If We Listen?

Matthew 17:1-9

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Glenn York was one of my favorite people. He was a quiet, gentle man. He loved his wife deeply, delighted in his children, grandchildren, and friends, worked to be faithful to his God. And while Glenn had plenty of skills for conversation, he could sit for long periods of time in a room with lots of conversation going on and not say anything. It wasn't that he fell asleep; it wasn't that he zoned out. It was just that he knew how to listen. In fact, he would often draw on that familiar adage: God gave me two ears and one mouth. And, for those of us around him, what this meant is that when Glenn spoke, the rest of us knew we needed to listen.

Listening. It's something many of us don't do well even as there are many sources trying to teach it.

This week I discovered that on Princeton University's website there is information about their U Matter Initiative which is about giving "everyone the tools they need to create a safer and more caring community" ([UMatter \(princeton.edu\)](https://umatter.princeton.edu)). And there, among other things are some tips for learning to listen ([Learning to Listen | U Matter \(princeton.edu\)](https://umatter.princeton.edu/learning-to-listen)).

They read this way:

"Stop talking. You can't listen if you are talking.

Concentrate on what the other person is saying. Actively focus your attention on the person's words, ideas and feelings....

Understand the other person. Try to put yourself in the other person's place so that you can see what he or she is trying to get at.

Avoid jumping to assumptions. Don't assume that you know the situation. Assumptions often get in the way of your understanding...

Recognize your own prejudices, be objective. Put your personal opinions aside and respond in a way that simply says the speaker has been heard but not judged...

Allow for silence. Give them time to say what they have to say.... Don't speak too soon and try not to interrupt the other person. Ask questions...

Use open-ended questions. This encourages the speaker to say more.

Listen Actively."

Perhaps we all have learned listening tips like these before. But the reality is that whether we learned from a class or website, or from the example of others, we would all do well to do more listening.

But what does this have to do with today's scripture?

After all, as Marian just reminded us, this is the story of Jesus' transfiguration. We read about Jesus and a few of his disciples going up the mountain. We read about them seeing important, yet long dead, people of the faith. We read about the disciples noticing that Jesus' appearance had changed, that his face and his clothes looked different than they had ever seen before.

And these tend to be the details we remember about the transfiguration story. These tend to be the things we focus on. We tend to focus on what happens to Jesus more than how it impacts us.

But there is one phrase in this scripture that I suspect we rarely pay attention to.

After noticing that Jesus' appearance had changed. After noticing that Moses and Elijah had appeared. After offering to build tents for each of them - after all, Peter was one of those wonderful disciples who just had to be *doing* something. After all this we are told that a voice came from the cloud, and in a way that brings our minds back to Jesus' baptism, that voice claimed Jesus saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased..." (Matthew 17:5b).

But what we sometimes miss is that the sentence doesn't end there. Yes, we hear...this is my son...this is my beloved...I am pleased...but we often read right past the statement that follows, when that voice turns its attention to the disciples and consequently, to us.

Listen to him!

The voice of God not only claims Jesus, but also instructs his disciples. If they are to follow him, they must be listening to him. If they are to learn from him, they can't be jumping to their own conclusions about what his ministry will look like, but need to be paying attention, listening and watching and actually doing what he does.

Of course, Matthew tells us that when the disciples heard this voice, they were so overwhelmed with fear that they fell down on the ground.

Perhaps it isn't accidental that the first thing Jesus says to them, after they hear the voice of God, is: do not be afraid. Because, friends, being in the presence of God - that can be intimidating, it can cause a little fear. And, listening to Jesus, if we are really listening, well that might just have us shaking in our boots as well.

And yet, the instruction is clear...if we are to follow Jesus, we must listen to him.

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This means that we don't get to shape him in our own image. In spite of centuries of Christianity painting Jesus as a blond, blue-eyed person...in spite of centuries of church leaders telling themselves that Jesus would support their relationships with money and power and kingdom...in spite of centuries of church people excusing their sinful behavior while singing to themselves, "Yes, Jesus, loves me" - in spite of all of that, we do not get to choose who Jesus is. Instead, if we are to follow him, we need to listen to him, to see him clearly, and then to set our feet on his path, to shape our lives to look more like his.

And yes, again, this can be scary. It is no wonder Jesus says, "Do not fear" so often. Because truly doing the work of God, truly being the hands and feet of Jesus as we are often known to claim, can be difficult and frightening work.

And as Jesus' disciples, it is the work to which we are called.

So, if we are listening, what do you suppose we will hear?

"Love your neighbor...and yes, that includes the neighbors you don't want to claim."

"Share what you have...and yes, that even means to the point of true sacrifice."

"Stand up for those whose voice has been taken away...and yes, that will be uncomfortable."

"Get out there in the real world and meet people where they are...and yes, even when they are hurting and in need."

"Ask questions, even in the face of authority...and no, they will not like it."

In other words, when we listen to Jesus we will be changed. How can we not?

While Jesus may have been the one whose appearance was transfigured...in this experience and in the experiences that followed, the disciples continued to be changed, to be shaped to be more faithful, to grow in ways that allowed them to carry on Jesus' work in this world.

That same invitation is issued to us. When we are listening to Jesus...when we allow ourselves to be honest about who he was...when we set aside our assumptions and desires and allow ourselves to see and hear Jesus clearly...then we will be changed as our plans are interrupted and our lives reoriented.

Perhaps it is not accidental that in the church year the transfiguration story shows up right as Lent is about to begin. After all, seeing Jesus in a new light might just set us up to be ready to use the season ahead to open ourselves up to listen, to learn, and to commit to living more fully as his disciples.

You just never know what might happen if we really listen. Amen.