

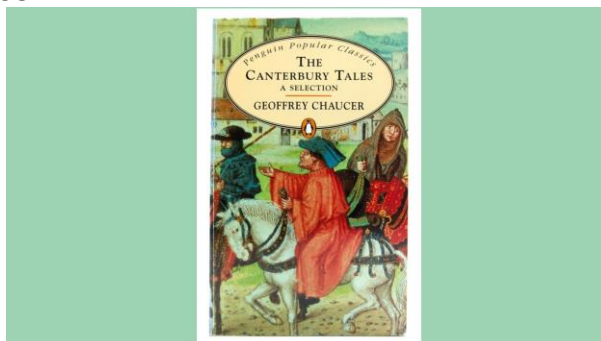
Is Anybody Listening?
James 1: 17-27
Isaiah 55: 6-11
Reverend Dr. Bill Young
September 15, 2024



My grandmother Bertha always had a pithy saying ready for any situation.



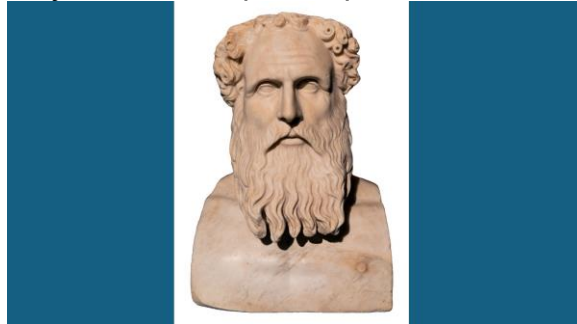
For example, when she felt someone was offering her unsolicited advice, she might respond, "Proffered help stinketh!" which roughly translated into contemporary English means "Don't stick your nose in where it doesn't belong." I always thought her favorite sayings came from the Bible, and most did, but some I've learned, including this one, were from other sources.



The saying "Proffered help stinketh!" is not biblical as far as I can tell, but first appears in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Wherever it comes from, it's good to remember not to tell someone what you think unless they ask for your advice, because as my grandmother Bertha used to say, "Proffered help stinketh!"

Another maxim my grandmother liked to use has a similar theme. I can vividly

remember her saying to me when I wasn't paying attention, "You know, Bill, God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason, because God wants us always to remember that it is twice as important to listen, as it is to speak." This one is not Biblical either; it comes from the 5th Century B.C. Greek philosopher Zeno.



I'm not surprised my grandmother cited liberally both the Bible, classical sources like early English literature and ancient Greek philosophy.



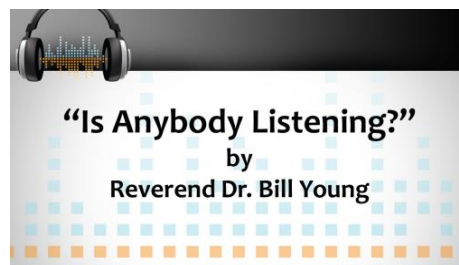
She graduated from Park College in Parkville, Missouri, just outside Kansas City, at a time when Park was one of the finest Presbyterian liberal arts colleges in the nation. At Park College she studied the Bible, philosophy, and literature in equal measures.



The saying that we have two ears and only one mouth because it is twice as important to listen as to speak may not itself be biblical, but it does express an insight the Bible certainly endorses. The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is full of such observations. For example, Proverbs 13:3 notes that "those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin." Proverbs 21:23 says, "To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble." And In Proverbs 15:28 we find: "The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil."



In the Letter of James, the New Testament book most similar to the Book of Proverbs, the author, who is remembered as the brother of Jesus, gives practical advice on how to live in this world as a follower of Christ. James tells us that when we have been born anew in Christ and God's word has been implanted within us, we will take on a new way of living. If you want to know how to live as a Christian, sit down and read carefully through the five chapters of the Letter of James and you will receive some very helpful guidance, as relevant today as it was when it was written. Let's focus in the few moments we have this morning on some of the verses we read from the first chapter of the Letter of James.



After reminding us that all gifts come to us from God who "gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" and that even though in our desire and envy we give in to the power of sin, God has placed in our hearts the word of truth, so that, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we may lead new lives, freed from sin's power. The very first insight James gives on how to live the new life in Christ is this: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness" (1:19-20) (Repeat)

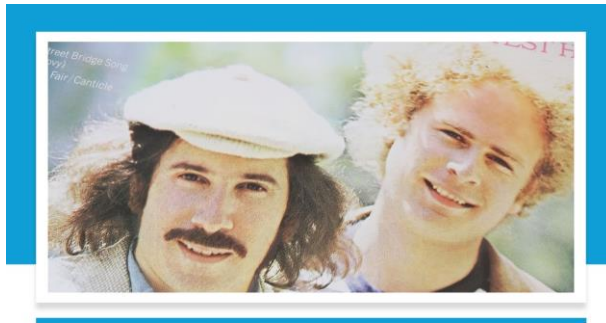
What could be more important for us as Christians today? We live in a time of growing polarization, both in society at large and even within the Christian church, when we are quick to denounce those with whom we disagree and vilify those who we do not even know. How nasty has it become? Some years ago Sue and I were in downtown Columbia during the funeral of a soldier who had died in Afghanistan.



We were there not because we knew the young man or his family ourselves, but because we had learned that representatives of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas would be there to spread their message of hate, which they claimed comes from God.



We wanted to join with those who would stand with the family of the fallen soldier as they entrusted their loved one to the eternal care of a loving God, and shield them from a group who called themselves Christian but who had allowed hate and anger to consume them, producing, as James describes it, "sordidness and rank growth of wickedness."



When I came of age in the 1960s a popular song by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel expressed the failure of people to listen to one another.

Ten thousand people, maybe more,
 People talking without speaking,
 People hearing without listening,
 People writing songs that voices never share
 And no one dared
 Disturb the sounds of silence.

I wish I could say that six decades later, we are doing a better job of listening to one another, but I am afraid the truth is we are not. We have made amazing strides in the technology of communication, but not in the art of listening. It is so easy to become so wrapped up in our own thoughts, desires, and concerns that we have trouble focusing on others. The following verse may not be very good poetry, but it does sum up well the reason most of us are not very good listeners.

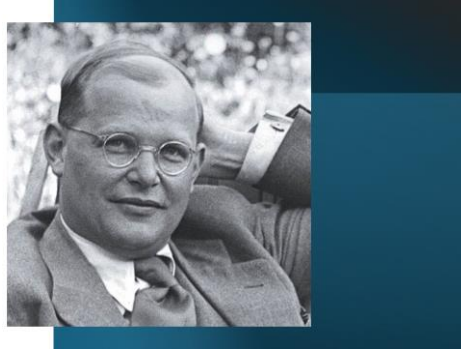
I bend a sympathetic ear to other peoples' woes,

However dull it is to hear their real or fancied throes.

I pay every line attention undiminished

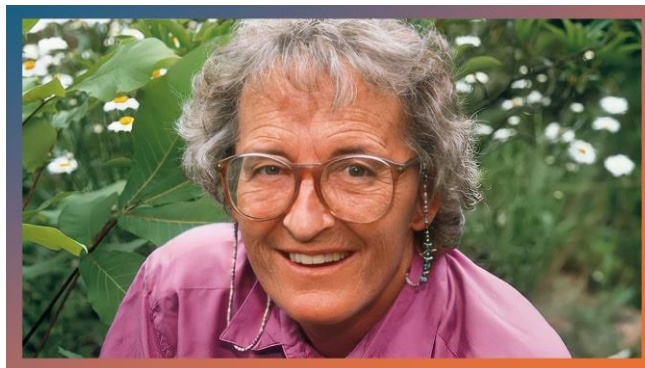
Because I plan to start on mine the moment they are finished.

What is hardest for us to do is what others often most need from us--simply to be quiet, and listen, without judgment, letting the person who is trying to share something important know that we hear them and we care.



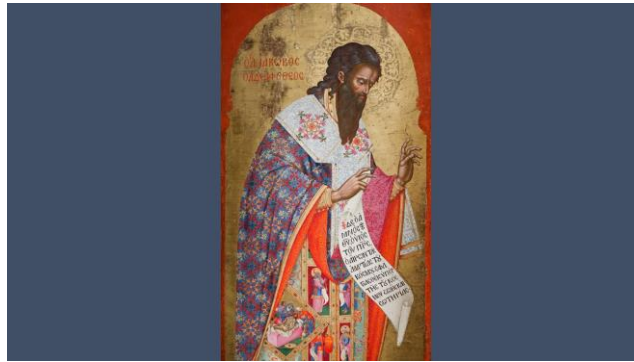
As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who not only wrote eloquently about the Christian faith but lived that faith out to the point of giving his life for others, put it, "The first service one owes to others is listening. You cannot love God without listening to his Word. How can you love another person unless you listen to him [or her]?"

The prophet Isaiah, in our Old Testament lesson for this morning, gives us a vivid image of what happens when we are receptive to God's word (55:10). Just as the rain and snow come down from heaven and nourish the earth, bringing forth seed for the sower and bread to the eater, so does the word of God come forth from the mouth of God and accomplish that for which God has sent it. In other words, if we are truly open to God's word, we will thrive in life. And, again, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, just as we cannot truly love God unless we listen to and receive God's Word into our hearts, we cannot truly love our neighbor, as God instructs us to do, unless we truly listen to what is on our neighbor's heart.

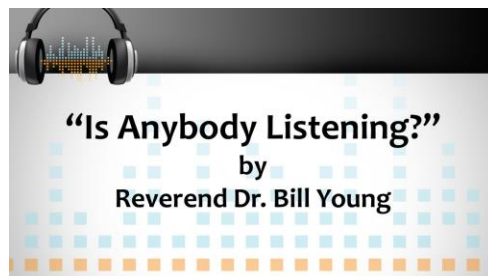


The basic qualities of good listening are exemplified in a story told by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, the psychiatrist who helped revolutionize the way we care for people who are dying in our society. When Dr. Kübler-Ross began her study of death and dying, she was working in a Chicago hospital on a ward where she knew there were many terminally ill patients. However, when she asked to interview some dying patients, the medical staff told her no one on the ward was dying. She would have to

look elsewhere. Baffled, Dr. Kübler-Ross noticed that there was a janitor on the ward who seemed to spend quite a bit of time cleaning in certain patients' rooms. One day she waited for the janitor to leave one of these rooms and went in to see a very sick patient with a smile on his face. When Dr. Kübler-Ross asked what had just transpired between the janitor and the patient, she was told, "She looked at me without looking away and asked me how I was feeling; then she sat down, took my hand and actually listened." Dr. Kübler-Ross learned that the janitor made eye contact with patients, asked an open-ended question, then, either sitting at their beds or while continuing her work, listened quietly as the patients told their stories, speaking only to let them know she was hearing what they were saying. She did not offer advice, or even the typical words of consolation. She just listened. When Dr. Kübler-Ross tried the same simple technique, she found the dying patients opening up to her, and from what she learned from them she developed an understanding of death and dying that has helped millions of terminally ill patients, their families, and those caring for them in the final stages of life.



In his letter James begins his discussion of what it means to live a new life in Christ by admonishing us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak," but he does not end there. He tells us that we must be doers of the word as well as hearers. And he is quite specific about what it means to put our faith into practice. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father," James writes, "is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." In other words, if Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, dwells within our hearts, we will minister to others simply by listening to them, but we will also engage in works of compassion for those most in need in our world. We will not let ourselves be consumed by the materialistic values of our culture that cause us to lead self-absorbed lives, but we will, as Jesus himself admonished us to do, show we love God by loving our neighbors.



So, what is God's word to us this week? First, God calls us all to be better

listeners to others, beginning in our own families and in our church family, always remembering, as my grandmother Bertha used to say, "God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason ... " You know the rest. (Wait for answer). And, second, God calls us to recommit ourselves to be doers of the word, to become more active in the various ministries of compassion in which Trinity is engaged, caring for those who are hurting physically, emotionally, or spiritually within this church, this community, our nation and throughout the world.

"And now," as is written at the close of the Letter of Jude (who was another of the brothers of Jesus), "to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."