

Trinity College Sermon
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Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Imperative of Listening

One of my father's most annoying phrases, and he had a few, was that I had two ears and one mouth and in that physical fact lay a great truth: I should listen more and talk less. As someone paid to teach others I clearly have not learnt his lesson. But when I found myself repeating this phrase to my own nine year old son I realised two things: one, it was just as annoying when I said it to my son as when my father said it to me; but two, that it was true and much as it pained me to admit it, my father was right. I was reminded of my father's phrase on reading this passage from Bonhoeffer and provoked by this passage I want to reflect on how listening is a central command for us as Christians and at the same time deeply counter cultural and prophetic in the contemporary context.

The passage from Bonhoeffer read today is from his book *Life Together*. This was written as a reflection back on the experiences of running a seminary in Finkenwalde. It was written in 1938 in the midst of the Sudentenland crisis and huge uncertainty about what the future might hold for him personally and for the Confessing Church he was part of. It was written in over a four week period staying in the empty house of Gerhard Leibholz, a professor of law at Göttingen University who was of Jewish origin and had been dismissed from his post. Bonhoeffer helped the Leibholz family escape to Switzerland. In this time of crises and rapid change, a time when, above all else, there would seem to be a need for action and to be useful, Bonhoeffer sits and writes a book that has at its heart of a vision of faithful community the virtue of taking the time to listen.

In his concern for the importance of listening Bonhoeffer is echoing one of the defining commands of the Old Testament given in our Scriptural reading from Deuteronomy: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love

the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' This is of course basis of the Shema, the most important Jewish prayer that is to be said morning and night and for the truly faithful is to be the words of one's dying breath.

The Shema is not just a command – or indeed, as Jesus taught us, part of the summary of the law and the prophets – but is also a confession or creedal statement that proclaims there is only one God. Through Bonhoeffer we can link this confession of faith with personal confession. For Bonhoeffer, the doctrinal confession becomes real in our act of listening to one another and hearing and providing absolution for each other's sins. He calls hearing the confession of another Christian 'the greatest service ... that God has entrusted to us.' Why might this be the case?

The Shema teaches us that listening is a sacred act that orientates us to God. In listening first to God we are able to orientate ourselves to and receive the world rightly. In listening first we recognise God's prior action which we are then to respond to. For Israel and the Church the act of listening forms the People of God. For the People of God listening is *the* constitutive act. Through listening and responding to the Word of God the church – like Israel before it – is assembled as a public body out of the world. In being called out, this body is then enabled to participate in God's hearing of the world, and so it can discern the truth of the world and respond accordingly. This runs counter to our modern sensibility that we make the world, constructing it in our image, reshaping nature and our relations with others to suit our needs, choices and desires.

In contrast, actively listening to the Word of God, primarily in preaching and liturgy, alerts us to the constant temptation to instrumentalise others and the world around us. Attention to what Luther called the *verbum externum* alerts us to the fact that we do not possess ourselves or make our world. Listening to the Word of God inserts an important reminder that all our actions and relations are derived from the prior, originating power of God.

Bonhoeffer says ‘We should listen with the ears of God, so that we can speak the Word of God.’ For Bonhoeffer, listening with the ‘ears of God’ is the necessary precursor to being able to proclaim the Word of God because those who do not listen to others, or who presume to already know what the other person has to say, will soon no longer listen to God. For Bonhoeffer, the practice of confession best embodies the importance of listening because it positions Christians towards each other as forgiven sinners: that is, as those who have been freed to serve and bear with each other and their neighbours from a position of humility and hope. Listening to Scripture and to each other is a way for us to practice humility, ensuring we glorify God rather than glorifying ourselves. It is an antidote to self-glorification, idolatry and regimes of control and manipulation.

Those in Christ are freed through Christ to take the time to listen and thence act responsibly with and for others. That is why the first act of service, the first form neighbor love takes, is for Bonhoeffer the act of listening. Or as he puts it: ‘We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.’ As those who listen to God first, we are freed to listen to others, receiving them not as a threat to our constructions of the world but as a gift given that we might participate in God’s creation more fully and truly.

As well as an act of humility and love, listening is an act of faith that whatever the relationship between oneself and another, Christ’s life, death and resurrection creates a common world in which all may now participate. Just as God created us as one family, so now in Christ, we may be one again, sharing a common life with others. As such listening to God in worship and to others is a therapy to the overriding sense of suspicion that governs our cultural and political life. What social theorists call the hermeneutics of suspicion refuses a common world of meaning and action, locating the real meaning of something as hidden or as intending something other than what is actually said. The suspicion that our spouse, our friend, our work colleagues don’t really mean what they say undermines the possibility of acting together and building a common life. Instead we think there

are only private or hidden interests. People don't really mean what they say so we need to construct an alternative explanation. At that point, we have stopped listening to them and started listening to only to ourselves.

By contrast, listening is an act of trust in the words of others. Listening makes it possible for people to have a life together. When we stop listening to God and each other, trust dissolves, loyalty breaks down and rupture, discord and enmity soon dominate human relations – whether in a marriage, a college, or a country. At this point confession becomes necessary. For as Bonhoeffer puts it in the same section: 'In confession there takes place a *breakthrough to community*. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from community. ... In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness.' When you find yourself isolated by suspicion of others – take the time to listen and to confess.

Listening is part of how we become a neighbor. Being a neighbour is not a condition or state of being or pre-assigned role but a relationship that emerges through listening to who is before me. Unlike such things as family, class, ethnicity, or gender, I cannot predetermine who is my neighbour. Neighbours have neither assigned social identities (e.g. father, sister etc.) nor institutionally constructed roles (e.g. doctor, postman, academic, IT officer etc.). Rather, as the parable of the Good Samaritan indicates, on occasion the call of the neighbour supersedes prior commitments and demands, whether professional, religious, social or political. We can encounter a neighbour in any one of our roles. Conversely, we have to constantly learn how to be a neighbour. Listening is the curriculum of neighbourliness. Through listening we can discern who is the neighbor to be loved in this place, at this time, among these people. And it may well be different in a different place and time among different people.

In listening one must take seriously who is before us and attend to the situation rather than predetermine what to do in accord with some prior agenda, ideology or strategy of control. But we cannot attentively listen at a distance or if

constantly mobile. Listening requires active involvement and commitment to a particular place and the formation of relationships in that place because building trusting and stable relationships takes time and personal presence. This is at the heart of Bonhoeffer account of community life in his book *Life Together*.

As his biography makes clear, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a man of the people but a highly cultured member of the German upper middle classes whose friends and family had a vested interest in the status quo. Yet in contrast to many of his peers he is not swept along by the revolutionary fervour that came with National Socialism or a sense of resentment at the treatment of Germany by those who won the Great War. He was able to stand apart from his culture and upbringing and its subsequent dissolution through his identification with Christ. In practice this meant he listened to Scripture and learned the value of listening to others and it was this that freed him from the madness that engulfed his homeland.

We can learn from his example, especially as those located in elite circles – whether these be academic, political or economic – and who are used to being listened to. So, let us practice the ministry of listening that has been entrusted to us by the one who is indeed the great listener and in whose work we are to participate.

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Readings: *Life Together* ‘Service’

The first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love of God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them. God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God’s Word, but also lends us God’s ear. We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them. So often Christians, especially preachers, think that their only service is always to have to “offer” something when they are together with other people. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people seek a sympathetic ear and do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking even when they should be listening. But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking even in the presence of God. The death of the spiritual life starts here, but in the end there is nothing left but empty spiritual chatter and clerical condescension which chokes on pious words. Those who cannot listen long and patiently will always be talking past others, and finally no longer will even notice it. Those who think their time is too precious to spend listening will never really have time for God and others, but only for themselves and for their own words and plans.

For Christians, pastoral care differs essentially from preaching in that here the task of listening is joined to the task of speaking the Word. There is also a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. This impatient, inattentive listening really despises the other Christian and finally is only waiting to get a chance to speak and thus to get rid of the other. This sort of listening is no fulfillment of our task. And it is certain that here, too, in our attitude toward other Christians we simply see reflected our own relationship to God. It should be no surprise that we are no longer able to perform the greatest service of listening that God has entrusted to us – hearing the confession of another Christian – if we refuse to lend our ear to another person on lesser subjects. The pagan world today knows something about persons who often can be helped only by having someone who will listen to them. On this insight it has built its own secular form of pastoral care, which has become popular with many people, including Christians. But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been entrusted to them by the one who is indeed the great listener and in whose work they are to participate. We should listen with the ears of God, so that we can speak the Word of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, ed., Geoffrey Kelly, trans., Daniel Bloesch and James Burtness, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 98.

Scriptural reading: Deuteronomy 6.1-9

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.