

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
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“Are We Still Listening?”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

In 2004, the United Church of Christ ran an ad campaign with a theme still popular in our churches today, “God is Still Speaking.” We added this phrase on to the end of a Gracie Allen quote, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma, God is Still Speaking.” Overnight, it was like the UCC now had an identity, we became the “comma” church. The twofold goal of the campaign was to help the UCC gain a national identity, and to give members of the church an easy answer to the question, “Who is the UCC?” It worked, as we began to say “We are the church that believes God is Still Speaking, more and more people would reply, “Oh I saw that banner at a church by my office, or near my child’s school, or in my neighborhood.”

14 years later people still use this phrase, probably more than any other, to identify the UCC. But, as you might suspect, this campaign had its critics. Most of the critics did not argue that God is Still Speaking, instead they wondered if the United Church of Christ was listening, or were we attributing other voices to God? We may not agree with the critics but it raises a good question, can we do better at listening?

In Hebrews today, this “letter” does not begin like other letters in the bible. Ancient letters were known to begin by identifying the author, the intended recipients, and offering a greeting to the audience. Instead Hebrews begins more like an intriguing sermon, “Long ago and far away God spoke to our ancestors in many and varied ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken through a Son.”

The passage becomes for all of us, an intriguing call to listen.

I came across an African Proverb about listening, “When you see two Africans, one is speaking, and one is listening. When you see two Americans, one is speaking, and one is waiting to speak.”

How often have we found ourselves beginning to form a response, or piece together our thoughts, or formulate a reply while the other person in our conversation is still speaking?

Listening is so much of what professional Therapists do we might ask ourselves; what does it say that an entire profession of skilled listeners has emerged able to reflect with the speaker what is truly being said. At the very least it suggests good listening skills are in short supply.

Today the author of Hebrews starts out with a call to really, listen, to the voices of past prophets, and in his day to listen to Jesus. You may note these are two of the more challenging voices to hear in the bible. The prophets of the Old Testament risked their lives to tell the people that some of what they thought was “good” living, was actually sinful. Think of Micah, Jonah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Amos; these and other major and minor prophets warned and sometimes condemned the people for living selfishly, or greedily, or oppressively.

We don't like some of the things Jesus says either, "turn the other cheek, love your enemy, free the prisoner, liberate the outcast, welcome the foreigner." Some messages are really hard to hear, so this call to listen is a modern call as much as an ancient one.

I think the author of Hebrews is sensing that this new church was losing its ability to "listen." This church had been a rather successful as a new mission start. The work of the Spirit seemed powerful. Their worship and community life were full of vitality. But problems arose when their vitality led to friction with people outside the community, who found this enthusiastic group of worshippers too peculiar to fit into the conventional social order.

The ancient world offered many religious options and this new focus on Jesus became a source of suspicion and controversy. There were threats against the Christian group and some were arrested, but others remained supportive. In the face of hardship, the congregation rallied – at least for a while.

Over time hopelessness set in. Apathy spread. When asked why they no longer attended worship, people replied they simply forgot or did not feel like it. The writer describes "neglect" in Hebrews 10:25. The gospel seemed promising at one point, but over time the actual experience of life in Christian community seemed to fall so far short of the Kingdom of God many didn't want to bother any longer.

So how did the church in Hebrews revitalize? The author called them back to God's Word. A return to Jesus. This story proclaims that God has spoken Jesus Christ into being. He is heir of all things, a perfect reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's own being... he sustains all things by his powerful word. He is God's Word made flesh.

We can think of times in the gospels when we hear the voice of God; Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration. Both times the ministry and mission of God's people was soon to undergo a major renewal. At the baptism it would not be long before Jesus became leader of the movement, taking over when John the Baptizer was put to death. At the transfiguration, the disciples with Jesus would finally receive a glimpse of eternal glory, a glory promised to all who follow Jesus. This would provide renewed energy for serving and loving others.

We can think of times in our own lives when we felt deeply heard. When someone else demonstrated they were paying attention; when they withheld judgement and reflected what we were saying back to us accurately, when they checked in on the emotions we demonstrated, and were able to accurately summarize what we said, asking asked clarifying questions when they weren't sure. Those moments in life were often times of great joy.

I invite you to recall the feelings and thoughts you experienced during a conversation where you really felt heard, you were confident the other person understood. Notice what feelings and thoughts come back... was your heart elated? Did you sense satisfaction? Did you sense your relationship with this person expand or deepen? Let those feelings and thoughts dwell in you. Close your eyes if you want. Let the goodness begins in your arms and legs, grow into

your back and pour into your heart, circulating like fresh blood. Let your body be lifted to new levels of satisfaction, new planes of acceptance, acknowledge how good it felt to be truly understood.

Nothing we can buy, no pill we can take, nothing can lift our spirits like the moment we feel truly heard and understood, fully accepted and loved.

The author of Hebrews is calling us to give this gift of listening to each other. And as we so often raise our prayers to God, filled with litanies of our concerns; the author asks us to give this gift of deep listening to God. Allow time to listen for God. Give God and each other the joy of being heard and understood and loved. We can all become better listeners.

This kind of attentive listening doesn't solve all our problems, but it is a full-on attack on apathy. It is Jesus approved medication for despair. This listening renews our strength and energizes us in a way that becomes contagious. On this World Communion Sunday, this gift can help build unity and foster understanding which will remain firmly planted overtaking the weeds of violence, hatred, and division. Yes...God IS Still Speaking, and today may we renew our commitment to listen!

Amen