

Lord, Let us Listen: Week One
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In a recent edition of the magazine Presbyterian Outlook there was an interview with a pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church about a new movement called “Deep Listening Dinners.” It began in 2017 and was modeled on similar ideas: “The People’s Supper” “Speak Down Barriers”, and a large outdoor potluck dinner called “The Big Table.”

The format of these dinners would be familiar to us, yet different too. There would be welcome and food. Hospitality and chatting. Someone, of course, would have to clean up. But what is different about these dinners is the stated intention: to create a place for deep listening.

In order to do this, the planners divided people into smaller groups of 6 or 8 and always included a prompt to initiate personal storytelling. The hosts also reviewed table etiquette specific to the event: don’t interrupt someone telling their story, remember, no one is trying to change someone’s mind, stick to the theme. And if you are speaking, the main thing to rule of thumb is to be courageous, be honest. This is not a typical dinner party, but people are interested in hearing stories of **real** struggles, **real** fears, **real** hopes and dreams.

An example of a recent theme was “Home.” The prompt was tailored to evoke specific and personal stories as each

participant was asked to share “Where have you called home and where are you finding it now? What places have and continue to be most meaningful in your life?” Nanette Swayer, the organizing pastor, says “These dinners provide an opportunity to share more deeply, to reflect, and to be known.”

Not too long ago, we gathered for a deep listening talk. Almost a hundred people met in the Fellowship Hall to hear from Mr. Brendan Murphy, a history teacher at Marist school doing work with peacebuilding among religions. The program he brought to us was a two-part lecture series on the history of Christian Anti-Semitism. It was a complicated lecture – going all the way back to the Gospel writings, the early church fathers, and moving us up through the Holocaust to today. We learned a lot, we certainly did, but I believe the most important – and challenging – thing we did that night as a church was to listen.

Especially, when it came time on Monday evening for questions and observations from the gathered audience. This was deep listening because many of the people in attendance were not church folks. As we all know, churches can become quite insular, echo-chambers of what we want to hear. So, it’s a good thing the gospel is always moving us outwards. We are asked to consider how do we serve our neighbors? How do we engage our community? How do we spread Jesus’ message of radical welcome out beyond these

doors? The motion of the message of the gospel is moving outward – to love and serve the Lord.

And with this particular program we got something right, as many folks in the audience were not familiar to me. Some of you had invited your neighbors, some were followers of Mr. Murphy and his work. Others were just interested in learning more. So as he opened it up to questions, I was excited to listen. I was interested to hear from what promised to be a variety of perspectives.

And we did hear questions that were not our own and experiences that were foreign to us. I'm sure of this because we are Christian and many of the speakers who shared from their personal stories were Jewish. Maybe you heard a query that had never crossed your mind – How much training about anti-semitism do pastors receive in seminary? Maybe the memory of The Temple Bombing made you remember the Civil Rights story of Atlanta and Covenant a little bit differently than the usual tale? Maybe you had to remind yourself what was being referenced when “the events of October 7” kept coming up? Did you squirm when political opinions were shared that were not your own? And maybe your heart skipped a beat as you ingested your neighbors very real fear, one you had not yet considered.

As we heard from the people in attendance, the history lesson became current. We better understood the ways we as Christians have moved and move in the world, and the

impact that has on others today. We changed. We grew. We may have walked away with the same opinions, but the act of being open to others deep sharing was impactful. And this all happened because we showed up in a room **and listened.**

When I was in my first hospital chaplaincy stint, I worked at the Veteran's Hospital called "Mountain Home" in Johnson City, Tennessee. I was still in seminary at the Princeton Theological Seminary, so lived with my parents in my home town and commuted in every day. It was an amazing experience, a deep well from which I still draw strength; but, at first, I was rather impatient.

"Honestly, what is the point of chaplaincy! I thought one day. You go say hi to folks in their hospital rooms." At the VA where I served we tended to see two types of patients. We either visited WWII vets who were approaching the end of their days typically surrounded by hymn-singing family and friends. Or we saw Vietnam vets who were dealing with early-onset physical and mental health problems. They were often alone and didn't have the same familial support.

One vet I remember clearly, when I asked about the important people in his life, told me every single detail about his cherry-red truck. At first, I thought he misheard me. I wanted to talk about family history or hear about his broken relationships and attendant grief. But I'll never forget my supervisor helped me to see this story as a gift. That truck

was the most important relationship in his life. He was a reclusive vet who was damaged by trauma, fighting with addiction, when we still knew so little about PTSD. Don't you see how important this story was to him, whether you liked it or not, he was letting you in. Chaplain Pollard said, "I had been giving the honor of this story. I was serving Christ by just listening to him."

But that's not what it feels like I would protest. It seems like I'm just listening – not much is going on.

Let me stop you right there, my supervisor said. When you are hearing a story – one of truth, of love or fear, when you are hearing a story that has never been shared before you are not JUST listening, you are JUST listening – as in justice listening – providing the safe space for a voice to be heard.

Authentic listening is not a popular mission field, I know. We would rather be saviors who use our special skills or resources to fix problems that can be quantified and accurately determined. Or we would at least want to be relevant, creating a statement paper on a political policy that puts us on the right side of history, or at near the seat of decision-making. But what if our neighborhood needs less strength and maneuvering and more self-giving power, more self-sacrificing love. What if just listening is what we are called to well?

A recent article said Atlanta claims the space of the 4th loneliest city according to Chamber of Commerce.org. The primary metric is people living alone, so I'm not sure that equals loneliness, but it does mean there is less face to face interaction. You know this, I know. I hear about the welcome you give to new neighbors, an invitation to dinner for the woman down the hall, those who are wondering about living alone in a building full of people. I know in your work you treat with respect the person drops by every day and you realize that talking cheese with him, may be the only human conversation he has that day. You are JUST listening well.

Our passage for today is the story of Abraham and Sarah listening in the desert to the call of God. They hear and respond and go on to be the GREAT FAMILY with as numerous as the stars. The family from which all the monotheistic religions trace their roots: Christians, Islam and Judaism.

I love what the children's curriculum Godly Play has to say about this story. When Sarai dies, the curriculum says that Abraham was very sad; but, Sarah died because she had many, many years.

I thought this was a lovely way to explain death to children: it makes sense of the order of things, offers comfort along with reality, hope along with sadness. One child I remember after telling this story came up to me afterwards and said, my grandmother just died. As I begin to comfort him, I'll never

forget the imploring, incredulous, awe-struck look on his face when he turned to me and piped up “Do you think my Granny had many, many ears like Sarah?”

What a blessing to listen well, to just listen to God’s loved world and people. To be a person, to be a people to be a church with not just many years, but many ears. Thanks be to God Amen.

May it be so. To God be the Glory. Amen.