



"Anybody Listening?"

*The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California*

*Sixth Sunday after Easter 2010
May 9, 2010
Acts 16:9–15 (NRSV)*

Stories about the early apostles' lives have been our primary worship texts for the past five Sundays.

Cheryl Fields Tyler rightly explained last Sunday that Acts is not a play-by-play record book about the early apostles. It is, instead, an historical novella filled with vignettes about the lives of many early church heroes. Acts is grounded in first-century Greco-Roman culture, and based on some historical facts, but the main purpose of the book is to convey the essence of the early apostles' lives and inspire faithfulness in the next generation—not to leave a tidy trail for church genealogists and historians. Acts was, for all intents and purposes, designed to convey the *significance* of the apostles' lives and not so much the specific facts of their lives.

As I poured over the book of Acts these past five weeks and more, the thought occurred to me that a modern day equivalent to the book of Acts would be something like a cross between a box set of Rick Steve's international travelogues and the collection of eulogies that I've written over the years.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is the primary traveler, Luke is the travel guide, the first apostles are the primary subjects, and the audience for the travelogue and remembrances are Christians and prospective Christians who lived in the generation after Jesus walked the earth.

II

Today's scripture is the sixth in a succession of seven apostolic vignettes that we will survey this Easter, which ends next Sunday. The following season is called Pentecost, which begins with the Feast of Pentecost on Confirmation Sunday, May 23.

Before I get into today's passage, here's a quick review of the characters featured during the past four Sundays since Easter.

Doubting Thomas was the first apostle featured in the Eastertide lections. That was on April 11. Paul's conversion or "Damascus Road experience," as some describe it,

followed on April 18. Don Gall preached a sermon about the resurrection of Tabitha on April 25. Last Sunday, Cheryl Fields Tyler delivered a sermon based on Peter's conversion, and today we read and reflect on the Apostle Lydia.

Each apostle's biographical sketch gives us insight into their distinctive character and personality and is inspiring in its own right, and yet all of these stories together create a kind of symphony of narratives that will blow you away if you pay close enough attention to what is being described.

Thomas, for example, illustrates for us that doubters can be Christians, and that in fact doubt plays a healthy and pivotal role in faith formation and reformation.

Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus reminds us that a "total turn-around" is sometimes needed and is possible—not just for some people—but for people who at one time or another might have been "enemies of the gospel." Paul, as you know, not only experienced a total turnaround, but went on to become one of the most prominent leaders in the Christian faith.

Tabitha's death or near death experience, which we visited two weeks ago, was in many ways a reenactment of the Easter story. Tabitha was a patron saint of the poor, who fed and clothed widows and orphans. She was also the only woman referred to as a "disciple" in the gospels, and she, like Jesus, was (and is) revered for having shown great compassion to the poor.

Peter's conversion, which Cheryl preached on last Sunday, was a call to the early church and to Christians in every time and place to not only welcome strangers, but to become cultural bridge builders, like he did, by taking the first step to embrace people and practices that were peculiar to him (to us) in order to advance the mission of God.

III

Today's reading explores the role of Lydia in the life of the early church, and the gifts that she brought to the Christian mission.

In Acts 16, we crack open Acts and find Paul preparing for a long missionary journey. The night before he departs on his trek, he was told by God in a vision to move north toward Europe instead of west toward Asia. (Apparently this is how God gets through to people who won't stop and ask for directions.) After that dream, Paul followed God's instructions and took the gospel to Europe, to people who had never heard it before and to places where he had never been.

The way that Luke tells the story, Lydia was among the first people he met on his mission trip north and the first European convert to Christianity. Lydia was an important figure in her community, and ultimately in the early church. Modern feminists love her, because Lydia was a successful business woman who knew her own mind, handled her

own affairs, and was head of her household. She was also a major leader in the European Christian mission following her conversion.

Modern historians and theologians are so taken with Lydia's unconventional roles and riches that they often glance over an important characteristic that is more often associated with women than men—which is unfortunate—because this quality is greatly needed across the whole gender continuum. The characteristic, of which I speak, of course, is listening.

Listening is an important skill in the business world, especially in sales. A salesperson doesn't close many deals nor have many returning clients without understanding customers' needs. And how does one discover those needs? Well, by listening—not just to the words their clients say, but how they say them and the meta-messages that are embedded in their respective descriptions. And even anticipating those needs before the customer can express them.

Lydia, no doubt, was a skillful listener, and her listening skills contributed to her success as a business woman.

She also proved to be a good listener to God and to the Apostle Paul. Luke, the author of Acts, explains in today's reading that Lydia was converted by the Spirit because she listened to what Paul was saying. Lydia's *attention* enabled her to hear God's *intention* for her life. Her deep listening led to a profound personal and spiritual transformation, and ultimately the transformation of her entire household, and to all the people in Europe whom she brought into the faith.

Careful listening is an important business skill and a skill that contributed greatly to Lydia's conversion and to her effectiveness as an early apostle. Listening is also a crucial skill for success in personal relationships, especially among family members. I think we know this truth from our own experience and from the influences of the human sciences, such as psychology, on popular culture. But that is not all.

As we celebrate the Festival of the Christian Home, I think that it is worth noting that listening, really listening, to God and to each other is an important spiritual practice that we can all cultivate, but it requires intention and attention. When we are *intentional* about this spiritual practice of listening, and we give God and each other our *attention* we are blessed, our families are blessed, and we become a blessing to others.

IV

To be sure, we live in an age of information overload. (Can I get an "Amen!" on that?) One of the books in my professional library is titled *The Attention Economy*. It's a business text, but that title could have been used for a book about family dynamics, global politics, or classroom management. Wouldn't you agree?

We live in an attention economy. We are surrounded by noise. We carry our smart phones and iPods everywhere we go. We get e-mail and text messages 24/7. We are drowning in information, but how much listening is going on?

How much time do we spend listening for God?

If God spoke to us in a vision, would we recognize His voice? If She said go north instead of west, would we be listening as intently as we do to our own GPS, or would our response be more like how our teenagers answer us when they are listening to a new MP3 that they just downloaded?

“Huh?” “What?”

If our answers to these questions concern us, what will we do about that fact? Will we accept the status quo, or do as Paul and Lydia did, and seek out a quiet place to pray, so that there at the crossroads between our *attention* and God’s *intention*, we hear—really hear—what God is saying to us, and we get up and take a different path. We go north instead of west. Our lives are changed, and the life of our household and its members are transformed.

How much time do we spend listening to our loved ones?

If you are between the ages of 8 and 18, the answer to that question is, not much. That’s not just because you’re a youth. It’s because, according to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation that was released in January, youth in our culture spend virtually every waking minute that they are not at school online, texting, playing video games, or otherwise “wired.”

This calculation does not include the amount of time that our youth are on cell phones or Tweeting. (Tweeting wasn’t yet the phenomenon that it is now, when the Kaiser study was last conducted.) The 2008-2009 Kaiser study that was just released in January showed that America’s students are wired 8½ hours a day, which is an hour longer than results showed in a study conducted just a few years earlier. Researchers themselves were shocked by their results. The recent study goes on to illustrate that most youth have learned so well how to multi-task that they are actually consuming closer to 11 hours of multi-media content in a day.¹

What do we conclude about these results? Some would bemoan the advances of technology and embrace a Luddite philosophy. Perhaps a more realistic approach is called for in my view. Technology has potential for both good and ill. Decrying its advances will not solve our listening problems. We had listening problems before we had all this technology, and before we lived in a world of instant messaging.

What is to be done?

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/20/education/20wired.html>

The Kaiser study indicates that families who have rules that limit the amount of time that students have access to media helps improve grades and attitudes. But even if we “unplug” our kids and ourselves, there is still no guarantee that listening is going on in our families. And children and youth aren’t the only ones who need to work on intention and attention in our culture. We all do.

Listening is a spiritual practice. It takes intention and attention. I admire parents who check in with their kids every day about school, their social lives, their activities, and most especially their feelings. Of course, we can simply ask the questions and run through a daily check list. But we achieve better results when listening becomes more of a spiritual practice than a daily drill.

Listening becomes more of a spiritual practice and less of a daily drill when we find a time of the day to ask these questions, when all involved are not in a mad rush. Otherwise our interactions look more like “drive by” conversations, and the truth is that probably no one feels truly heard when all that’s exchanged is information.

For some families, the best times for these more intentional conversations are around dinner, bedtime, on the weekends, and during some down time on family vacations. The setting for our best listening opportunities will vary across families. But true listening has similar qualities across for all of us. True listening requires intention and attention. Signs of *intention* are that we routinize our efforts. Signs of *attention* are evidenced when we make eye contact, ask open-ended questions, use reflective listening skills, and focus on the other for as long as is needed to be heard.

Listening matters for all kids, but especially for at-risk children and youth. Studies conducted by the Stone Center at Wellesley College in Massachusetts in the late 1980s looked at the differences between girls who thrived and those who didn’t. The primary correlate that researchers found for resilience and success in girls and women, particularly among “at-risk” youth growing into adulthood, was that someone listened to them—someone was really there for them and listened to them when they were young. That someone didn’t have to be their mother or father or even a relative, but it was wonderful when that was the case. That someone could have been anyone who genuinely cared for them and who was a consistent, healthy presence in their lives.

I wonder, who was that someone who listened to you? Who are you—who am I—there for?

V

The research results that I’ve shared from the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Stone Center may not knock our socks off. These findings may seem like common sense to all of us. And yet, as we know, taking time and getting to a spiritual place where we feel ready and able to hear and hold what another person says isn’t always easy. We may not always feel that we have the time, even when we wish we did. And even when we think we are listening, our body language or our spiritual disposition may not imply that

we are walking that talk or living out of our espoused theology. Listening, really listening to each other is a spiritual discipline. It takes intention and attention, and yes, it takes time.

And hard as it is to be intentional and attentive, and hard as it is to find the time to listen, it's worth it! Listening is its own reward, and it creates other rewards. Good stuff happens when we listen to God and to each other. Think about your own life. Think about a time when someone listened, really listened, to you. Who was that person? What kinds of things did you talk about? What did you learn about the power of listening? About yourself? About God's hope for your life?

Perhaps you learned that listening changes everything. If we listen, really listen, we will find ourselves going in new directions and headed to different places—like Paul. If we listen, really listen, we will find our lives totally transformed, as Lydia did, and perhaps too, we will find our household transformed in a good way, and be able help others experience a deeper and more meaningful spiritual life.

Believe the good news of the gospel, God listens to us. God calls us to listen to each other. And as we do our relationships with God and each other are enriched, personal and family transformation is possible so that we become the healthy persons and families that God envisions us to be. Amen.