



Listening Matters

SCRIPTURE:
James 1:17-21

August 1, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose, he gave us birth by the word so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness, and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. —James 1:17-21 (NRSV)

Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of life cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all creatures. Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all the spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life. —James 1:17-21 (The Message by Eugene Peterson)

I learned about listening from Kelsey, a six-year-old. I was visiting her and her parents in Sacramento. I was there to preach in her Mom's church. On Saturday afternoon, Kelsey asked if I wanted to sit with her and watch her favorite movie, Disney's "Aladdin." Her Mom was getting dinner ready and she said, "Rodger, you don't have to watch 'Aladdin' with Kelsey." And I said, "It's 'Aladdin' with Kelsey. I can't think of anything I would rather do on a

Saturday afternoon in Sacramento." So, we sat on the floor of the living room (because we had to be up close) and we watched the movie. If you know the movie, there is a wonderful song in it, "A Whole New World." And just as Aladdin started to sing it, I joined in: "I can show you the world. Shining, shimmering, splendid. Tell me princess, now when did you last let your heart decide. I can show you the world. Take you wonder by wonder. Over sideways and under on a magic carpet ride. A whole new world." It's a beautiful song. And as I was singing along with Aladdin, I felt this sharp pain on my lower arm, and I looked down and there was Kelsey with her hand around my forearm with a vice-like grip looking up at me very disturbed. Despite the loss of blood circulation in my arm, I was trying to smile at her and she was definitely not smiling at me. In fact, she was looking rather perturbed. Then Kelsey said, "Uncle Rodger, Uncle Rodger, no, no. Stop. Stop. This is not a singing time." And I smiled and said, "But Kelsey, I love this song and I like to sing. And would you please release my arm because I am afraid it is going to fall off." And Kelsey, this six-year-old authority with a kung-fu grip, said, "No, Uncle Rodger. This is a listening time. Just listen."

James would have loved Kelsey. So, this begins a four-week sermon series from the book of James. The tradition says James was the younger brother of Jesus who later became the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. He writes this book to the Jewish diaspora—the Jewish believers who are scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. James' letter is known for its practical wisdom.

In this first chapter, James reminds us that all that is good and beautiful, all good gifts around us, they come from God the father and mother of us all. And

listen to this, the word of truth is already in us, born in us. All we have to do is recognize this truth in us and live it. Then James lines out that truth as a way for us to live in the world. Here it is.

Be quick to listen. Slow to speak. Slow to anger. Be quick to listen. Slow to speak. Slow to anger. Say it with me, please. Be quick to what? Slow to what? Slow to what? For James, like Kelsey, we are always in listening time.

Several years ago, I was in Ghana teaching at the Presbyterian seminary in Accra. I was having lunch with the dean of the seminary in the cafeteria and the dean was asking me about the differences between teaching in Ghana and in the U.S. I told him that the students here were very attentive and very polite. The dean smiled and said, “You know, here in Africa, we have a proverb for everything. We have a proverb to describe what you are experiencing. We say that when you see two Africans talking, you see one person speaking and one person listening. When you see two Americans talking, you see one person talking and one person waiting to talk. In Africa, we listen.”

James says, come on Christians. Be quick to... what?

So, because of James, I have been noticing how, at times, I interrupt people. That’s a bad habit. And it’s rude. I have resolved to stop interrupting others.

I was talking to a former professor colleague of mine about this, and he said, “Well, I also interrupt people a lot.” I asked him, “Why do you think we do that?” He answered, “I don’t know about you, but I think it’s their fault that I interrupt them.” “It’s their fault?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “If what they were saying was more interesting, then I wouldn’t interrupt them. But because it’s not interesting, I have no choice.” “Because what you have to say is so much more interesting?” I asked. “Exactly,” he said. “So, that you are rude and interrupt people is really their fault.” Wow. I will not tell you who said this but if you knew him, it explains a lot.

James says be quick to...? And slow to...?

There is such power in listening to another. In these pandemic days, in these polarized days, listening—really listening—is a superpower. It has the power to love and to heal. I know this. I believe it

because I have seen it.

One of the most difficult things I have done in my life is serve on an administrative commission. This happened when I was in Atlanta. In the Presbyterian Church, when a church is in deep conflict or when a pastor or elder is accused of some kind of misconduct, an administrative commission is formed. This small group, sworn to confidentiality, meets to gather testimony and recommend actions. A pastor in the presbytery had been charged with sexual misconduct by a young adult. It happened when the young adult was a teenager. I don’t have to tell you that these were very serious charges and could result in the pastor losing their ordination.

We met with the young adult and heard their testimony. We met with the pastor and heard their testimony. The pastor basically said the young adult was lying. We, then, with the pastor’s permission, discreetly inquired of the other two churches where the pastor had served and found two other young adults who were willing to talk with us. Three of us flew to southern California to interview these young adults. None of them knew each other. They were all in different congregations. When we met with the first young adult, that person told us how the pastor had abused their trust. How this young adult loved this pastor and trusted them. What saddened us was everything they shared was nearly identical to what the young adult in Atlanta had said. The pastor’s actions were the same. The pastor’s words were the same. It was a pattern.

We were there for more than three hours. There were periods of silence. There were tears and anger. When the young adult said they were done, we asked if we could pray together, and the young adult said they had not prayed for years—ever since this happened. Then the young adult said it would be okay. After praying together, we thanked the young adult for their courage and their willingness to bare this wound in front of us. The young adult turned to us and said, “You know, everyone told me not to do this. They said you weren’t going to believe me anyway because you were church people. That you would attack me. I was afraid when I came here. I almost backed out several times. But you weren’t like that at all. I don’t even know if I care that you

believe me or not. But I want to thank you for coming all this way and for listening to me. Thank you for listening to me. It means a lot. It helped me a lot.”

Come on, church. All good things around us, they come from heaven above. The truth is born in us. Listening matters. It’s a superpower. You know what’s interesting is that some Bible scholars say that James’ formula is not just sequential but consequential. They argue that James is saying *when* you

are quick to listen and *when* you are slow to speak *then* you will be slow to anger.

Listening matters. So, stop interrupting people. Stop thinking that what you have to say is so much more important than what they have to say. Just listen to them. Hear them. And in so doing, we will build Christ’s church. Practical wisdom from James. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.