

**The Haydenville Congregational Church**  
***Open Hearts + Open Minds + Open Doors***  
**August 30, 2009~~10:00 AM**

***“Be Quick to Listen”***  
**Carol Rinehart**

Friends, let us take a moment to center with prayer:

Loving God, grant that the words of my mouth and the movements of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight as we listen together for your blessing. Amen

The book of James is understood to be essentially a sermon that is framed to read like a letter to the “the 12 tribes of the Diaspora ” (a way of pointing out that this Jewish-based Jesus movement is now spreading far beyond Israel). It is a letter to those who have chosen to follow Jesus’ teaching—as James refers to it, “the perfect law, the law of freedom”.

A quick re-cap of the passage Lisa read us would go something like:

Be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to anger. But even if you feel you have truly heard the “perfect law”, don’t deceive yourselves into thinking that hearing is enough. Without doing what you need to do to take care of the widows and the orphans, you are not fulfilling the law of freedom. “Getting it” and yet not doing anything is like seeing your true self in a mirror and then instantly forgetting what you look like once you walk away.

I’d like to invite us to listen to this passage on three different levels:

First, let us listen for what this passage tells us about our call to social justice.

Second, let us look at its message about listening in order to care for the suffering of others, and think about its relevance for hearing and loving one another;

Finally, I’d like us to think about listening as prayer, for clearing the way to hear the echo of God’s voice as it reverberates through our innermost hearts and minds until our sense of being blessed overflows to all we meet.

Here are the key terms: quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, care for the widows and orphans. What was the nature of widows and orphans in the day of the early Christians? Who were the widows and orphans that the writer of James was speaking of? Women and children who had lost all the protection that existed

through membership in marriage or family. That would include, a place to live, food, rights to be protected, to be safe or secure. Abandoned, neglected.

From a social justice point of view, the preacher of James seems to say, “If you are claiming you hear a gospel of justice and mercy, kindness and compassion, and are not involved with the suffering of the homeless, the hungry, those who are imprisoned, with immigrants and refugees and people who are in anguish, then you can’t readily claim you heard it.” That’s hypocrisy. On the other hand rushing to care for the victims of injustice from a place of self-righteous anger can actually be a case of being *quick to speak and quick to anger but slow to listen*. Often we would much rather roar with outrage about people who thwart the goals of justice—“I am disgusted with those ignorant people who think healthcare for all will be haunted by goblins of death panels who will pull the plug on Grannie!”

Even without righteous anger, rushing in to “help” people we see as “widows and orphans” can be a little like that old Buster Keaton silent movie where he keeps trying to take a blind lady across the street when she really doesn’t want to go. There are some absolutely wonderful sayings about the dangers of being too quick to speak in Proverbs. I recommend it to you for a grin at the salty truths they offer. Proverbs 18:13 reads, “To answer a question before you hear it out is both stupid and insulting.” (New English Version)

Being quick to listen is the principle behind the Class and Faith work that our church is doing with several other churches and the survival centers through the Women Building Bridges project. Rather than rushing into give resources without involving our hearts, we are creating spaces for listening and discovering the unique gifts we can offer and receive from one another. By sharing food preparation, for example, we make space to hear and know the dignity and wholeness of people we might have otherwise seen as simply “widows and orphans”. This is true to the law of freedom: from deep listening and mutual respect, comes a clearer sense of what would be true acts of justice and mercy.

Let us move on to think a bit about the relevance of this passage to loving and growing with one another.

The essence of the training we give to hospice volunteers, for example, is how to be quick to listen but slow to speak. The greatest gift we can give to people in one of the richest dark moments of their lives is gentle presence, a spirit of acceptance that often goes beyond words, an open invitation to let people talk, remember, grieve, be in the midst of something that cannot be changed or fixed.

In contrast, our natural habits run more toward advice giving and conversational ping-pong in which each person’s remark is the springboard for talking about ourselves:

“ Boy, I’ve had a hard summer.

“I hear you. You really should take a vacation like mine.”

Or

“I’ve had a hard summer.”

“I hear you: My summer has been remarkably hard, too. The trip I took to see my in-laws really sent me into a state.”

“You think you’ve got in-laws, let me tell you about the crazy thing my brother in law did. . . .”

“That reminds me of a story about my brother-in-law’s sisters boyfriend who did a really crazy thing last summer.”

And so it goes.

Our ability to truly hear one another may be challenged by the troubling “widows and orphans” that may exist between us: old hurts that never got addressed, arguments that got dropped instead of resolved, expressions of love that never got made or perhaps weren’t received as they were intended. Unproductive patterns that seem impossible to get unstuck; a conviction that we’ll never be heard anyway, so we speak defensively in order to protect ourselves or control worrisome situations.

In order to be loved and cared for, such widows and orphans must be acknowledged, listened to. Sometimes we need to ask to be listened to. Sometimes we need to give the people we care for a good listening to! What a great gift it is to engage in an act of listening, slow to speak and slow to defensiveness or anger. It can keep our souls from ricocheting against the walls we are tempted to put up.

Sometimes we need to find ways to gently coax our inner widows and orphans forward. We may need to be quick to listen to what is happening in our own hearts. The chattering of our inner talk is sometimes an effort to keep some kind of control over the nerve-racking widows and orphans we carry inside. Sometimes the place to start is with listening to our inner widows and orphans: neglected gifts and talents that cry to come forward: dreams and hopes that can make us feel jealous or judgmental. Perhaps our inner widows and orphans are feelings or reactions that we learned early on were unacceptable to our family or our culture or people we needed to love us: deep wounds that fill us with fear of being hurt further. Sometimes inner caution bells and yellow lights go off that keep us from listening.

Learning to be slow in anger with ourselves is perhaps the hardest task of all. These are the quick spoken inner statements that most of us must deal with: how silly of me, how could I be so stupid? I have no right to weep—others have it much harder! Why didn’t I? Why did I? Why aren’t I? Why can’t I seem to do enough, smile enough, cry enough, be enough? Why me?

Sally LeMaire once wrote a piece in a book of essays contributed by members and friends of this church called *This I Believe* in which she said,

I believe anger and joy  
face off with each other every  
morning to see who in the duel will win for that day.

I believe acceptance of anything  
less than my best effort  
to live a full and joyful life  
is unacceptable.

Such a dialog between anger and joy could only occur, I suspect, because Sally knows how to listen, to hear there is immense dignity in her existence, to grasp the truth that she is beloved of God and is offered a full and joyful life.

To be able to be slow to speak and slow to anger, our inner and outer widows and orphans need to hear God speaking. Be quick to listen when inner anger speaks-- not to nurse it, or fan the fire, or give it energy but to make space for these inner widows and orphans to be loved.

In past years I regularly met with a Marist nun for spiritual direction every few weeks. She would invite me to talk about my questions and struggles, all the time, sitting across from me with her eyes closed so that she could focus fully and prayerfully on our conversation. My reports would often be some version of "I really don't know what to think about (X)." Her answer would be, "What is the Lord saying to you?" "Oh! I've brought this in prayer again and again and I am reading this book and that bit of wisdom and this scripture and that prayer. "But what is the Lord *saying to you?*" Ah, I need to be quicker to listen and slower to speak incessantly in my prayers.

I remember a dear young woman who once came to me for spiritual direction asking how we know when it is God speaking. Maybe God is saying loving things to me, then again maybe I'm deluding myself and really the stern voice of my conscience is God speaking?

Sir Thomas Aquinas, widely regarded as the greatest Catholic theologian, has said,

Sometimes we think what we are saying about God  
Is true when in fact  
It is not.  
I have come to learn that the truth never harms  
Or frightens.

God's voice does not harm or frighten. If God is Love, then we can trust that God is speaking to us through beauty, through the love of others, through the sensations of warmth that we feel from bestowing love on others and from soaking in gestures of love from others. Love is the miracle that liberates, if we can only be quick to listen to the widows and orphans that yearn to be heard and blessed.

Henri Nouwen in his little book, *Life of the Beloved*, from which I read our opening words, said this:

I realize that, although I have a tendency to say many things to God, the real “work” of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. This might sound self-indulgent, but in practice it is a hard discipline. I am so afraid of being cursed, of hearing that I am no good or not good enough that I quickly give in to the temptation to start talking and to keep talking in order to control my fears. To gently push aside and silence the many voices that question my goodness and to trust that I will hear a voice of blessing . . . that demands real effort. . . . The faithful discipline of prayer reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others.

Bedtime prayer with my daughter when she was little always gave me a chance to give (and thereby receive) a blessing. I tried always to close with “May Nora know always that she is your beloved child. And may she be so filled with your love that it spills out onto others.”

Listen! Hear that you are God’s beloved—widows, orphans, warts and all. Come! Let us claim our blessedness and bless one another.

Amen