

“Listening to Each Other, Listening for God”

I am assuming that you have heard the saying “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” Well, since today’s passage deals mostly with earthly things we might wonder if it is any heavenly good for us. It seems to be nothing more than advice on squabbles among believers and how best to resolve them. It’s not bad advice mind you, emphasizing the importance of listening to one another. Listening is important, especially for relationships. As John Buchanan points out it: “There is no more powerful way to deny the very being of another than by refusing to listen. There is no better way to kill intimacy than to stop listening. And there is no better way to love—no greater gift—than to listen.” That’s all well and good, but still does it have any heavenly significance?

Jesus then says, “*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” These two words, binding and loosing are rabbinical terms for forbidding and permitting. Therefore, many commentators argue that in this passage Jesus is conferring upon the whole gathering of followers the authority to make decisions about what is permitted and forbidden and the warning that whatever they decide on earth will carry over to heaven. That’s seems backwards, doesn’t it? Wouldn’t it make more sense if it was the other way around, if Jesus said, “Whatever is forbidden or permitted in heaven will be forbidden or permitted on earth.” That formula makes more sense, right? We want our doctrines to be sent down from above: some divine parent figure telling us how to behave and helping us settle our childish squabbles.

But apparently, according to Jesus, that is not the way it works. God is not a divine squabble fixer. We have to work these things out on our own. At base, I think what Jesus is getting at is the idea that what we say and do here on earth matters; that there are consequences beyond what is immediately apparent; that the line between heavenly minded and earthly difference is not cut and dry. But if we stop here, and I think most do, we have nothing more than an admonition from Jesus on the importance of settling disputes, listening to one another and getting along with each other. And I don't think that is the message our congregation, most congregations especially need to hear. Most Christian churches suffer from the symptoms of false niceness: the pressure to smooth over the rough patches and keep things on positive and happy notes. A few weeks ago, Rev. Sharon Smith, talked about this in her sermon, naming it false peace. I like that. In other words, it's peace for peace sake, not true lasting peace. Peace is not peace if it avoids necessary conflict, if it is born of a fear of rocking the boat or of upsetting the status quo. Many, most, churches feel a great deal of pressure to maintain peace, even if it's false peace, and church members feel compelled to be nice to one another, even if there may be issues that need to be worked out and are preventing true understanding and affection. What I am saying is that we don't need to be admonished to get along; we need to be challenged to go deeper.

If we dig a bit deeper in this passage, I think we can find a message about more than the importance of listening to one another and settling our disputes. In this passage where Jesus is telling his followers that how they treat one another has lasting implications, where Jesus gives advice about listening to one another in

order to resolve disputes, we find a picture of God, not as divine parent or distant rule maker, but one where God is working in the space in between individuals.

Fred Roger's, the same of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, tells the story of listening to a sermon. He was a seminary student in Pittsburgh, fresh out of Preaching 101: homiletics as they call it in seminary. One Sunday he decided to attend the church of one of the best known preachers in the city. He went there, his head swelled with information about the latest in homiletics. As he listened to the sermon he wondered, "What's the big deal? This guy is not that good." Then all of the sudden he realized something: the woman next to him in the pew was sobbing. Later she shared with Rogers how much the sermon meant to her, how it had touched and moved her.

With all of his new found knowledge, Rogers forgot something important, maybe the most important thing. As he listened to the preacher, he was listening to the words he used and how he arranged them and delivered his message, but he wasn't listening to the message, he wasn't listening for God. As the words left the preachers mouth and traveled to the woman's ears something happened that no preacher can make happen. "I didn't account for the work of the Holy Spirit," Rogers admits. The difference between Rogers and the woman in the pew next to him was that she was listening for God.

And it's not just that way with preachers and congregations. Every time we listen to each other, we can listen for God; we can wonder what God might be trying to say to us through the other. As one theologian (Jurgen Moltmann) puts it, "the capacity to communicate, to be in communion with others is *always* a gift of God."

Part of the message that can be extracted from today's passage is that treating one another with respect and listening for the sacred in each other is part of the communion not only between one another, but mysteriously, through the work of Holy Spirit, between us and God. And as Fred Roger's story illustrates, this is not through an act of our own wills. It is not because we all have something great to say, although many probably do. It is simply because God wills it to be so. God makes us for connection, for communion with each other and with God. Wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus tells us, God's presence can be felt among them.

This is reflected in the way we organize ourselves as a community of faith and the way we set leaders apart in the Presbyterian Church. We don't rely on one or two leaders, but whole groups of people: elders, deacons, trustees & pastors. Some might point out that this has the potential to create more conflict. (Perhaps you've heard the joke: if you have 5 Presbyterians in a room, you'll have at least 7 different opinions.) It's true, there is more potential for disagreements and squabbles. But we also believe it gives us more of an opportunity to listen for God. And we believe that those who accept the mantle of leadership have done so because they have heard God's call for them to serve *through* the voice of the congregation. Admittedly, that is not always the way we think of it, but that is why we do things the peculiar way we Presbyterians do them. And we can always recapture that spirit if we remember that although God may leave us to figure out ways to resolve our own differences, God's presence is not far from any of us, and indeed the Holy Spirit is always at work in the space between us.