

1 Timothy 1: 12-17
Luke 15: 1-10
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
September 11, 2016

Last week I proposed that an important way that we listen deeply to scripture is by being open to hearing what God wants us to hear. Open-ness asks us to suspend what we think we already know about what the Bible says in order that we may listen for what scripture may be saying *to us*. Open-ness comes from a faith that God speaks through scripture to ordinary people. Indeed it is only when I accept that I too am an ordinary person, even though I am a minister who has gone to seminary who is *supposed* to know what the Bible says, that I have a chance to hear a whisper of the Living God through God's Word.

Open-ness depends on the fact that there is a God who created the heavens and the earth and in love created me and created you. More than this, this Great Good Being who is beyond any intellectual understanding *yearns* to communicate love and hope to each and every human being. God has spared no effort to make communication possible. He has created all people with a receiver which when properly attuned can pick up the God frequency. We call it being made in God's image. Everybody has it. It is present in people from all nations and creeds. It is present in all races and orientations. It is the one great fact of human life which is intended to unite all humanity into one people of God.

It is this great fact that lies at the heart of the best of all spiritual traditions however those traditions may speak of what is sacred and of ultimate meaning.

It is this great fact that creates and sustains vitality in all spiritual traditions. There *is* a Great Reality. I can experience that reality such that it shapes and directs my life. As I am able

to listen for and recognize the active presence of this spiritual power in my life, I can begin to recognize that presence not only in my own life, but in the life of another person. This is the fruit of Open-ness.

When we are secure in our faith that God speaks to ordinary people like us and we can be open to listening to and for God in our own lives, we are then able to become *curious* about what God might want to say and to listen. We feel free to say, "I wonder...?" We do not immediately close off listening because a given scripture challenges some deeply held belief. We do not pay attention only to scriptures which confirm what we believe and experience. We do not stop listening when another person has a different experience of God and the scripture, or has an interpretation which does not agree with ours. In short we listen. We notice our reactions. We become curious about why we are responding in such a way. Slowly we become aware of the presence of God beyond our immediate thoughts and reactions and become responsive to how meeting that presence shapes what we do.

This understanding I propose was the hallmark of how Jesus taught. We see it in today's scripture recorded by Luke. Notice how the reading begins with a situation: Jesus is meeting with "tax collectors and sinners." Religious leaders are also present and grumbling about how Jesus is meeting with people who, according to their understanding of scripture, he should have nothing to do with.

Perceiving this, what does Jesus *not do*? He does not lecture them. He does not defend the tax collectors and sinners. Instead he tells a series of stories of which we heard two. He simply lays the stories side by side with the situation and allows the people who are there listen for their own responses.

First Jesus asks those gathered to imagine being a shepherd who has lost a sheep. He then asks a question, “Wouldn’t you leave the sheep which are safely in the fold and go seek the one which is lost?” Again, Jesus does not draw a direct line from the lost sheep to the tax collectors and sinners. He does not make explicit the connection between the religious leaders and the shepherd. He allows the listeners to make their own associations. Next Jesus raises the example of a woman who has ten silver coins and who loses one.

The response to the loss in each case is the same: an exhaustive and painstaking search which when successful is the occasion for great celebration, not just of the one who lost the sheep or the coin, but the entire community.

In both cases Jesus concludes the parable with a pronouncement: “There is great rejoicing in heaven when one sinner who repents. Indeed there is more rejoicing in heaven over the repenting of one sinner than over the righteous ones who no longer need repentance.”

Now Jesus could easily have given a long, carefully reasoned lecture on the danger of trusting in our righteousness and comparing our relative virtue with those whose lives are not as virtuous as ours. He could warn the Pharisees not to judge a book by its cover. Some of the world’s greatest saints started out as lost souls. He could even imply that the tax collectors and sinners gathered before him are more loved by God than the law abiding religious leaders.

But the blunt fact is that Jesus does not do this. He tells these stories and then steps back. He allows the Holy Spirit to work in each heart to accomplish God’s purpose.

This is why you and I need to be careful not to rush to “the meaning” of the stories as if there is only one meaning. The beauty and power of Jesus’ parables lies in the fact that on any given day we might hear something different. On any given day in any given gathering there

may be, and probably are a range of reactions and responses. I can easily imagine that on the day Jesus told those stories there was a scribe with a terribly guilty secret who was afraid of being cast out if he made his secret public. Might he have gotten the message that God was looking for him? Might he have gone to Jesus and poured out his terrible secret and the awful burden of living a lie? Might he have dared to think that he would be received with the same joy as the lost sheep and the lost coin?

Or might there have been a sinner who imagined that she was in a special elite of spiritual sinners who were preferred by Jesus over those self-righteous Bible thumpers. Might she excuse her behavior because at least she was not a narrow minded self-satisfied prig? Might she find that it is not enough to show up in the presence of Jesus without an earnest desire to change our lives to become more like his?

Jesus does not tell us what the right response is. But he does make one thing clear: when we listen to the scripture there must be no comparing ourselves with others; there must be no excuse making about our sins; instead there must be rigorous honesty about who we are and who God is. It must become our dearest desire to shed whatever it is that keeps us from being shaped by God's love so that we can respond whole heartedly to the loving God who speaks to us. Amen