

Tell Me More

Sarah Gallop

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Scripture

Luke 8: 16-18

'No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.'

Romans 10:14-17

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

James 1:19

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

Sermon

The watercolor on the screen is titled "Alert to the Possibilities."



Boston-based artist Lisa Houck tries to convey the wonder and depth of nature in her work — in this case, the wise and perceptive owl, amidst his natural surroundings. A close look will reveal that the owl's context is deeply complex, with a multitude of colors, shapes, and layers in the background. The observant owl seems to revel in this dynamic setting — his eyes and body open and prepared to take in whatever possibility may come his way.

We bought this painting from the artist for our daughter Julia, and it hangs on her bedroom wall, which happens to be painted in a bright yellow color (that Julia chose) called “Full Sun” — perhaps you can imagine it ☺. The owl painting (“Alert to the Possibilities”) serves as reminder to our whole family that we can miss out on life if we shy away from new experiences or close off opportunities before they even have a chance to shape our individual human journeys. The “Full Sun” paint color on Julia’s wall seems an appropriate backdrop for the alert owl — bright, persistent, and hard to ignore — as if to remind us that *possibility* is in clear view all around us if we choose to embrace it.

A few weeks ago, Andy and I attended a memorial service for a longtime family friend. We had always known him to be a man of great integrity and humility — deeply spiritual, kind, and loving. He was also a large figure in his professional life as an NCAA basketball coach and athletic director. People came from all over the country to testify to the impact that our friend Curt had brought to their lives as a mentor, coach, colleague, and friend. Curt had always seemed to me to be a sensitive person, quick to show emotion, especially through his eyes — sometimes crying, always connecting in an authentic way.

Growing up, I was aware that he had been imprisoned for three years with his family in a Japanese internment camp in the Philippines during World War II. We had an unread copy of his book “Child of War” on a shelf at home for a long time.

In his later years, and with the influence of dementia, Curt cried more openly and frequently. Of course, we were always curious what made him cry and if we could help. It wasn’t until after the memorial service that I finally read his book “Child of War.” How I wish I had read it when he was alive — before his dementia had set in. I don’t know if he would have even wanted to talk about his experience if I brought it up. But, with the knowledge of what he went through between the ages of 8 to 10 years old, I could have at least tried to convey some compassion and understanding through kind words or a loving touch. It was a missed opportunity. I could never ask him to **tell me more** because I hadn’t been alert to the possibilities.

We can probably all make a list of regrets like this, and even though it’s unrealistic to think that we can capture the potential in every human interaction that we have, I feel certain that there are moments when we can experience one another’s humanity more deeply if we try.

Think of how often we are in conversation each day. At home, work, in stores, on the sidewalk, at church, on the phone. We probably don’t think much about our listening skills in any of those moments. We’re usually in the middle of something or going somewhere, and quite likely thinking about something else. Or, instead of actively listening, we’re thinking about what **we** want to say. Other times, when a person talks about something that is quite different from our own perspective or values, we may be quick to end the conversation out of a fear of creating friction, or simply out of a general feeling of discomfort.

In our haste, self-centeredness, or uneasiness, we may miss signals that a person is wanting to create deeper connection with us. We're often listening, but not hearing. We're not always alert to the possibilities. And we rarely say **tell me more**, especially when our views are different.

The scripture selections that Jennifer read this morning offer perspectives on listening and hearing. To me, they provide some guidance on how we might move our ministry of listening more towards a ministry of understanding. In Luke, we're reminded that all people have God's light inside of them. Think of that. Everyone here has that. We're asked to help one another's light to shine through — and certainly not to cause it to be diminished.

In Romans, we're challenged to listen with faith to the word of Christ – and it is then that we will be able to hear and embrace God's good news. As Jennifer read: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

And in James, the message is beautifully concise: "You must understand this, my beloved, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger."

I've always been intrigued by author and worship leader Marcia McFee's discussion of the phrase "Let us speak about the deepest things we know." McFee wonders: "Do we ask our communities of worship to speak about the 'deepest things'? Do we invite dialogue at all? Do we truly believe that God invites us to speak honestly in the context of our rituals of worship, of pain and uncertainty?" Her challenge to congregations to speak authentically and listen openly in the context of God's love isn't a novel idea, but since meaningful human connections can only be made through this kind of genuine interaction, it remains a relevant — and especially in today's world — even an urgent idea.

The best I can do to sort out what I read and hear in today's world is to conclude that we are in the midst of a national mis-understanding. Not that there was an event — some kind of misunderstanding — but that we have become increasingly incapable of understanding why others think, say, and do what they do. 'Mis' just means badly — we are understanding one another badly. Of course, I'm not talking about any of us here at church, where we are all naturally in perfect harmony — it's out there in the world where there is trouble ☺

There are all kinds of theories about our current national dynamics that explore socioeconomics, industry trends, the nature of education, the evolution of politics, changes in family composition, and other societal factors. Colin Woodward offers an explanation in his book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures in North America*. Woodward traces the historical roots of the core values that define each of these eleven regions. We live in 'Yankeedom' by the way — now **that** seems an inexcusable affront ☺.

This geographical approach in trying to characterize our national differences makes some sense to me — and perhaps it's at least one way for us to better grasp and respect what makes people tick throughout the country.

Learning more about these theories feels like an appropriate academic and ongoing kind of exercise, but what about our day-to-day lives? When we come across views and experiences that are different from our own, are we able to easily put aside our judgements and discomfort? Having different perspectives is no sin. We're naturally accustomed to our own beliefs, thoughts, and experiences. But, when we're faced with an unfamiliar way of thinking, do we convey an invitation of openness through our words and actions? Are we able to muster up the courage to genuinely ask the other person to **tell us more** so we can learn, understand and deepen our respect and appreciation?

Marcia McFee's 'deepest things' don't usually come out at the beginning of a conversation — if they come at all, they're typically at the end. Spurred on by our church's Death of Dinner event, I had a conversation with a friend about where we each wanted to be buried. I was crystal clear about the arrangements and precise location for my remains, but my friend said that she didn't really know, and that she may have her remains scattered in various places. Two opposite approaches!

The conversation could have easily ended there, but my friend and I are accustomed to speaking openly, so we took it further. **Tell me more** we each said. It turns out that my friend had grown up in a military family and had moved throughout her life, and a result, she doesn't necessarily have a connection with a certain town, or even a connection to the concept of 'place.' I had grown up in one town and spent summers in another, and feel entirely connected to those towns and to my perception of the security, comfort, and permanency that 'place' provides for my final rest. We were fascinated by one another's very different experiences and subsequent views — and it drew us closer.

Moving our ministry of listening more towards a ministry of understanding isn't a one-time decision to change how we're going to interact with people. Rather, it's a decision to examine, and hopefully grow, a patient and compassionate practice of genuine human interaction. And that includes being mindful enough to recognize when someone doesn't feel comfortable sharing, and that our affirming and loving presence is all that is needed in the moment.

As the wise owl is ever alert to the possibilities, may we recognize those moments in life where we can say **tell me more** in order to deepen the love and understanding among us. In doing so, we can reveal God's light that resides in each of us. And shining that collective light can strengthen our faith in the wonder that is humanity.

Amen

Benediction

Sarah: **May we be alert to the possibilities of God's love and the power of human connections**

Judy: **May we say "tell me more" in the right moment to shine God's light and deepen our understanding**

Judy and Sarah facing each other

Sarah: **Tell me more so I can understand**

Judy: **I want to know God's light within you**

Two sides of the congregation facing each other

Right says to left: **Tell me more so I can understand**

Left says to right: **I want to know God's light within you**

Sarah: **And may we all say...**

All: **Amen**

Sarah, her husband Andy, son Nick, and daughter Julia have been members of the church since 1998. Sarah taught church school classes for nine years, served on the Worship Ministry, Diaconate, and the Holy Destinations Committee, and currently serves on the Adult Faith Exploration Ministry.