

**May 3,**

## **Together, We Include Everyone**

**Key Thought:** The gift of inclusion comes by the laying on of ears.

*“There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfillment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude toward our brother only reflects our relationship to God. It is little wonder that we are no longer capable of the greatest service of listening that God has committed to us, that of hearing our brother's confession, if we refuse to give ear to our brother on lesser subjects. Secular education today is aware that often a person can be helped merely by having someone who will listen to him seriously, and upon this insight it has constructed its own soul therapy, which has attracted great numbers of people, including Christians. But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.”*

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*

Let me open this lesson by sharing a story from a book I wrote some years ago, *My Soul Purpose*. Here is the story:

I sat at a square of tables in a small classroom at the original Quaker House in Philadelphia. It was an academic meeting and we were having a “break-out session.” I had come to expect these sessions to be of little value, just superficial conversations yielding negligible results. However, this time I was wrong. There was a moment of authenticity that silenced all of us. It was a moment that reminded and renewed my calling in Christ.

A young woman who did not understand the perfunctory nature of these events took the conversation quite seriously and chose to unburden her soul. Her situation and difficulties were professional, yet deeply personal. It took the group by surprise. The easiest response was to give advice. And advice was fired back and forth around the table. The young woman listened but did not find help in the debate about her problem. We soon ran out of theoretical opinions.

An uncomfortable silence blanketed the group. People avoided eye contact. Some looked away from the table. There was one person who knew what to do. She was an older woman with a great academic mind. However, it was her spiritual wisdom that came to the surface.

She turned to the young woman, took her hand, and spoke to her as if they were the only two in the room. She said, "There are several faithful solutions to your problems. I don't know which one is best for you, but I will help you listen for it."

Holy listening is a gift Christians give to one another and to the world. We are often impressed with holy speaking, preaching the word, proclaiming the story, and declaring the truth. Holy speaking is essential and significant. But the balancing gift, the gift of holy listening, is also essential and significant. However, it is a quiet gift, and unnoticed gift, and a humble gift. Christians render deep and transformative service by the laying on of *ears*. This is the gift of holy listening.

Holy listening is embedded in a spiritual conversation that seeks to . . .

- 1) *explore* what is going on in your inner life right now,
- 2) *listen* for the guidance of God, and
- 3) *submit* your inner life to the love of God.

Holy listening requires faithful attentiveness to the presence of Christ and authentic commitment to the purpose of Christ.

Douglas V. Steere, the wonderful Quaker Scholar, author, and lecturer defines deep listening as "confirming the deepest thing in another" (see, *Together in Solitude*, 1982). He sees this gift of confirming the deep love of God in others as an educational process. Listening is paired with teaching. You cannot separate them. Jesus called us to "make disciples . . . teaching them to obey all I command" (Matthew 28:19-20). Perhaps we could say, "make disciples, which means you must listen with them so they learn to obey."

As a teacher, it is my privilege and challenge to confirm the best in each of my students. As a follower of Christ, is my calling and mission to confirm the truth of God and every person I meet. Here is what I know: If you want to include people, don't talk at them but listen to them.

In our Sunday School classes, we often have a time to gather around someone and lay on hands as we prayer for them. It is always a lovely moment. There is another moment I often see at the close of the class when people are gathering up belongings and chatting together before heading home. I spot two or three people in an intense conversation. They exhibit deep and intentional listening. When someone hears your heart, you feel like someone cares. You feel you really do belong.

In today's lesson, we will look at four passages of scripture that will help us understand and practice the gift of holy listening as a means of including others.

**Acts 8:26-40, Inclusion Means Listening to the Outsider**

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." <sup>27</sup> So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. <sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

*<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.*

*<sup>31</sup> "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

*<sup>32</sup> This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:*

*"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.*

*<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

*Who can speak of his descendants?*

*For his life was taken from the earth."*

*<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

*<sup>36</sup> As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" <sup>38</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.*

There is a lot of listening in this short story:

- Phillip listens to the Angel of the Lord and goes to the Ethiopian.
- Phillip listens to the Ethiopian and hears his heart desire for understand.
- Phillip helps the Ethiopian listen to the Scriptures that point to Jesus.
- Phillip listens to the Ethiopian's desire to be baptized and responds.

Look at the context of the story. The eighth chapter of Acts tells the story of the evangelistic work of Phillip. Phillip breaks barriers for the Gospel. *First*, he evangelizes the Samaritans (8:5-25) whom the Jews regarded as despised heretics and outsiders. *Then*, an Ethiopian Official hears and receives the good news of Jesus through the obedience of Phillip (8:26-40). Ethiopia was considers the extreme boundary of the habitable earth.

**1-Phillip listens to the Angel of the Lord and goes to the Ethiopian** (vs. 26-29). The “angel of the Lord” instructs Phillip (vs. 26). Then, the Spirit instructs him (vs. 29). The terms appear to be interchangeable. The instruction was to go to a desert road some sixty miles south of Jerusalem. He was not told why. He was told to go. He obeyed. When he arrived, the Spirit pointed him toward a chariot, “Go to that chariot and stay near it” (vs. 29). Phillip overhears words from the prophet Isaiah. Amazing! Perhaps we should take time to overhear someone’s heart before we rain down our words upon him or her.

Dallas Willard in his book, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, seems to get at the relationship Phillip had with the Spirit:

“Individually the disciple and friend of Jesus who has learned to work shoulder to shoulder with his or her Lord stands in this world as a point of contact between heaven and earth, a kind of Jacob’s ladder by which the angels of God may ascend from and descend into human life. Thus the disciple stands as an envoy or a receiver by which the kingdom of God is conveyed into every quarter of human affairs.”

In the same book, Dr. Willard gives us a painful thought to consider. Why do we not hear the word of God? He writes, “Our failure to hear His voice when we want to is due to the fact that we do not in general want to hear it, that we want it only when we think we need it.”

The art of holy listening centers on listening to God in our hearts, in his word, and in our conversations.

**2-Phillip listens to the Ethiopian and hears his heart desire for understand** (vs. 27-31). This is an astounding picture: Phillip runs along beside the chariot and hears a man reading aloud, as was the practice of reading in that day. Dignity and decorum were not Phillip’s primary concern. As Phillip listens to the words, he recognizes a passage from the book of Isaiah. Then, still running, perhaps short of breath, he shouts, “*Do you understand what you are reading*” (vs. 30)? Rather than being put off by such boldness, the man must have heard something genuine in Phillip’s voice. He invites him to come and sit in the chariot (vs. 31).

The man Phillip met was a eunuch (as were many court officials in that day and region). He was also “*an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”)*” (vs. 27). The term, “Kandake” (also transliterated as “Candice”) is the title for the Queen Mother of Ethiopia. Apparently, Phillip took the time to get acquainted with the official. He learned of his position as treasure for the Queen Mother. He also learned that the man had just come from Jerusalem where he went to worship. He learned of the man’s desire to understand the Scriptures. Holy listening moves from getting acquainted with each other to becoming authentic with one another.

**3-Phillip helps the Ethiopian listen to the Scriptures that point to Jesus** (vs. 32-35). That the man had a copy of the book of Isaiah was unusual. That he was reading Isaiah 53 is also unusual. At the time of Jesus, no one among the Jews had any thoughts of a suffering Messiah. Everyone expected a triumphant Messiah.

Why read Isaiah 53? No doubt the Spirit of the Lord had made preparations for this meeting. From a human perspective, we can make a reasonable and sanctified guess. As a eunuch, the man was separated from the covenant of Israel (Deut. 23:1). However, Isaiah declares the promise that eunuch's will be welcomed into the promises of God (Isaiah 56:3-5).

A natural reading of Isaiah moves from the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53) who provides a new future for Israel (Isaiah 54) with an invitation to all who are thirsty (Isaiah 55) including eunuchs and foreigners (Isaiah 56). We can understand why *"The eunuch asked Philip, 'tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?'"* (vs. 34). This was not an intellectual discussion. This was a deeply personal and holy conversation.

*"Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus"* (vs. 35). Notice that in this holy conversation, the Scripture is not used as a hammer to harm people but as an invitation to enter into life in Christ. Philip interprets the Scripture in the Spirit of Jesus.

**4-Phillip listens to the Ethiopian's desire to be baptized at once** (vs. 36-40). The man came to genuine faith. Apparently, in telling the story of Jesus, Philip began with the baptism and, no doubt, continued right through to the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. A holy conversation encourages belief. You must respect the moment and means when faith is born. In the next chapter, Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus comes to faith through a supernatural event. You must admire the Ethiopian. A holy conversation about the Scripture awakens his faith. Phillip agrees to the baptism. At the moment of baptism, Phillip disappears.

One more thought: ***In holy conversation, we are partners with Jesus.*** Howard Marshall (born in 1934), Professor Emeritus of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, draws a wonderful parallel between the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian and another story from the pen of Luke:

"The way in which the story is told there is some structural resemblances to another story in which a stranger joined to travelers and opened up the Scriptures to them, took part in the sacramental act, and then disappeared from view" (Luke 24:13 – 35).

### **Psalm 22:25-31 Inclusion Means Listening to the Cross**

*I will declare your name to my people;  
in the assembly I will praise you.  
23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!*

*All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
 Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!*  
<sup>24</sup> *For he has not despised or scorned  
 the suffering of the afflicted one;  
 he has not hidden his face from him  
 but has listened to his cry for help.*  
<sup>25</sup> *From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;  
 before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.*  
<sup>26</sup> *The poor will eat and be satisfied;  
 those who seek the LORD will praise him—  
 may your hearts live forever!*  
<sup>27</sup> *All the ends of the earth  
 will remember and turn to the LORD,  
 and all the families of the nations  
 will bow down before him,*  
<sup>28</sup> *for dominion belongs to the LORD  
 and he rules over the nations.*  
  
<sup>29</sup> *All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
 all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—  
 those who cannot keep themselves alive.*  
<sup>30</sup> *Posterity will serve him;  
 future generations will be told about the Lord.*  
<sup>31</sup> *They will proclaim his righteousness,  
 declaring to a people yet unborn:  
 He has done it!*

We now look at the most holy conversation, a conversation with Jesus on the cross and in the hope of resurrection morning. As Philip began in Isaiah 53 to explain the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, early Christians saw a similar truth in Psalm 22. The first verse of the Psalm is one heard from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." This is the only part of the Psalm that most people find familiar. However, far more of the Psalm points to the cross and also to the resurrection. The first half of the Psalm has become for Christians a meditation on the crucifixion. The remainder of the Psalm, our passage for today, points to the glory of the resurrection that includes life and salvation for all people.

***Listening to the Crucifixion (Psalm 22:1-21).*** The gospel writers heard the experience of Jesus's death in the Psalm. There are several verses lifted directly from the first half of Psalm 22 and placed in the Gospel story:

- *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"* (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46)
- *"They hurl insults, shaking their heads."* (Psalm 22:7; Mark 15:29; Matthew 27:39)
- *"He trusts in the Lord, let the Lord rescue him."* (Psalm 22:8; Matthew 27:43)

- “They have pierced my hands and my feet.” (Psalm 22:16; Luke 24:39-40)
- “They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” (Psalm 22:18, Mark 15:24, Matthew 27:35, Luke 23:34; John 19:24)

I invite you to read Psalm 22:1-21 and listen to the experience of Jesus on the Cross.

**Listen to the Resurrection** (Psalm 22:22-31). Now, turn your attention to the remainder of the Psalm. This portion of Scripture is also recognized in the New Testament as a word from and about Jesus. Compare the Psalm and the way it is rendered in Hebrews:

- Psalm 22:22, “I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.”
- Hebrews 2:12, “I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praise.”

Note: The phrase “my people,” used in the Old Testament becomes “my brothers and sisters” in the New Testament. The praises and promises that follow in the remainder of Psalm 22 are predicated on one fact (vs. 24):

*For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has **listened** to his cry for help.*

God has listened to the suffering of Jesus, the afflicted one. In listening to Jesus, the one who has identified with our humanity, our suffering, and our sin, God’s good word is available to all people. In a mystery made plain, the holy listening between Father and Son has resulted in new life for all and inclusion for all in the blessings of resurrection life. Notice all the people groups included who are now included:

- *The **poor** will eat and be satisfied; (vs. 26)*
- *All the **ends of the earth** will remember and turn to the LORD, (vs. 27)*
- *All the families of the **nations** will bow down before him, (vs. 27)*
- *All the **rich** of the earth will feast and worship; (vs. 29)*
- *All who go down to **the dust** will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive. (vs. 29)*
- ***Future generations** will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: (vs. 30)*  
***He has done it!** (vs. 31)*

Dare we believe that behind and within every holy conversation is the holy conversation between the Father and Son? When we listen with open hearts, seeking to hear each other, God listens in and Jesus is with us (Matthew 18:20).

## 1 John 4:7-21 Inclusion Means Listening to One Another

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

*<sup>13</sup> This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. <sup>16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.*

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. <sup>17</sup> This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

*<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*

We have learned that in the act of holy listening, we, like Phillip, partner with Jesus. We have also learned that the fountain of Holy Listening is between the Father and Son in the heart of the crucifixion. Now we turn toward holy listening in the church. We are to love one another; love begins with listening. An anonymous saying goes like this:

To love me is to know me  
To know me is to learn me  
To learn me is to listen to me  
To listen to me is to care for me  
To care for me says it all!

Let's walk through this beautiful passage of Scripture from 1 John 4:7-21:

- *Verse 7:* We learn that God is love. In Christ, our human love is a reflection of Divine love. God initiates love. We are reminders of God's love in the world.
- *Verse 7-8:* We learn that love comes from God and love leads to God. When we know God, we learn to love. When we love, we come to know God.



- *Verses 9-11:* We learn that Jesus is the model and motivation to love one another. God shows his love in sending Jesus; thus, we love each other
- *Verse 12:* We learn that we come to know God by love. We cannot see God, but we see the effect of God's presence. We cannot see the wind, but we know it is here. We see God when we love one another.
- *Verses 13-16:* We learn that to live in love is to live in God's Spirit. Faith in Jesus, the Son of God, establishes our reliance on God and the Spirit he has given us.
- *Verse 17:* We learn that as we live and become like Jesus we have confidence in God's future for us and for the world.
- *Verse 18:* We learn that we need not fear God. There are fears in the world, but God is not One to fear. There is no punishment, no condemnation in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).
- *Verses 19-21:* We learn that we are commanded to love one another. To testify of love for God while hating someone is to lie; we must love one another.

Imagine a *triangle* with point for *You, God, and Others*. Love flows from the points to all the other points. The love is vital. The love of God is a person, the Holy Spirit. The three points of the triangle form the place of Holy Listening, the place of loving God and one another. C. H. Dodd describes Holy Listening as life in the Spirit of God:

And he is that gentle voice we hear,  
Soft is the breath of even,  
That checks each fault, that calms each fear,  
That speaks of heaven.

And every virtue we possess,  
And every victory won,  
And every thought of holiness,  
Are his alone.

### **John 15:1-8 Inclusion Means Listening to Jesus**

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

*<sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you*

*wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

This familiar passage is attractive to us because it is at the same time *profound* and *perplexing*. It is **profound** because it helps us understand Jesus. He himself is the true vine. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were God's vine. They were planted to bear fruit. Nevertheless, God "*looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit*" (Isaiah 5:2). Again, God says, "*I had planted you like a choice of buying of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine*" (Jeremiah 2:21). In John 15, it is abundantly clear that Jesus has taken the place of Israel. Jesus is the New Israel. All God set for Israel to accomplish, Jesus has accomplish.

This passage is also profound because it deals with our union with Christ, a union apart from which we can bear no fruit (verse 4). Our intimacy with Christ is the heart of spiritual vitality. So important is bearing fruit that unproductive branches are pruned to make room for more fruitful branches. We know that we do not have to proceed very far into the Christian life before painful pruning begins. We may cry out in self-pity and confusion. However, in time we see that our heavenly gardener knows what is best.

This passage is as **perplexing** as it is profound. What kind of fruit are we to bear? How do we make sense of the extravagant promises of prayer that is always answered? What does it mean to remain in Christ? How can a branch that that is in Christ (on the vine) be fruitless? These are the questions from this passage that have lingered from the time John put the verses on papyrus.

It is tempting to apply a scientific mind to these words and reduce them to something that builds precept on precept. However, we are not talking about something that is open to scientific evaluation. We are looking at an intimate spiritual relationship of faith. The passage and our spiritual relationship with Christ always has been and will always remain profound and perplexing. The answer to our question is not in our reasoning but in our holy listening: *remain in me*.

Μένω μένω, **remain**; also abide, continue, dwell, endure, be present, stay.

The call to "*remain*" is not to stay in a location but in a relationship. This relationship, as discussed in this lesson, is one of holy listening. But, how? Let me share a short story that suggests practical application for remaining in Jesus, to engage in holy listening with him.

Many years ago, Reader's Digest carried a wonderful story, the story of Arthur Gordon. He was a successful man but under an enormous amount of pressure. He was feeling ill and went to the doctor for diagnosis and treatment. The doctor knew him well enough to know that this was not a problem that was physically based. And, this was a

doctor wise enough to not mask the symptoms with medicine but to treat the true cause of the problem.

He asked Arthur to wait while he went into his office and came back a few minutes later with four envelopes. He said they were four prescriptions. He was to take a day and go to the beach. Then, every three hours, he was to open one of the prescriptions. As he opened the envelopes, they read:

1. Listen carefully.
2. Try reaching back.
3. Re-examine your motives.
4. Write your troubles in the sand.

Let me make a spiritual application for our listening, our remaining in relationship with Christ:

*Listen carefully*; discern the many inner voices in order to hear the voice of God. God's voice will always move you toward Jesus. Seek the heart of Jesus.

*Try reaching back*; open your past, your wounds, your victories, your objections, your fears, all your inner life to Jesus. Seek the perspective of Jesus.

*Re-examine your motives*; what do you want in the depth of your soul; why do you want it; what are you willing to do for it? To give up for it? Seek the motive of Jesus.

*Write your troubles in the sand*; in Christian faith this means to trust Jesus with everything. The sea washes away what's written in sand; trust Jesus with all.