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## The Secret of Reconciliation

Matthew 18:15-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, September 10, 2017,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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It's no secret that the world and church are in dozens of splinters. Debates over DACA. Conflict with and over North Korea. Arguments over the place of Confederate monuments and images. Splits and rumors of splits over church doctrine and biblical interpretation. In so many ways, the Church is like the world and the world is in the Church. Many feel beat up from the feet up and tore up from the floor up. Crises and conflict abound and the Church is not immune from this. This shouldn't surprise us. As Princeton Seminary professor, Eric Barreto, reminds us, "what makes a church a church is precisely the presence of so many troublesome people." Now that I've said that, please don't start looking at your pew neighbors. The church is a hospital for the sick. The reality is that there will be conflicts in the Church and elsewhere. To quote a hymn, there are "many a conflict, many a doubt; Fightings within and fears without" ("Just as I am"). Wars don't only happen between nations on the oceans but between Christians in church fellowship halls and sacristies.

And when it comes to controversies or hot topics or problems or divisive issues, everyone wants to chime in, to be the first to break the news to the public. Everyone wants to make high ratings, to assert their opinion because it is so important and of course everyone wants to know what you think. They want to spread their solutions and give input on their blogs and their Twitter account, even without having all of the necessary information and facts. By doing this, people reverse the biblical wisdom of James and are quick to speak, and slow to listen when it should be the other way around. People love to talk, but not really listen. They want to jump into discussions that aren't theirs to have and share their latest views happily and willingly with whomever will listen, talking over each other, talking at each other, to each other, but not with each other, more interested in their voice than any other voice. Do you know anyone who if they ran, like their mouth, they'd be in good shape?

Speaking—and I say this as a preacher—is overrated. Yes, Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and not the ear of God. Yes, when God spoke, God's salvific word was Jesus. But let's not forget what else is in the scriptures such as, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" in Deuteronomy or "How can they hear without a preacher?" in the book of Romans. Or, in Acts on the day of Pentecost, "each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." The gift of the Spirit is not just about speaking but also hearing. There's not only the ministry of the Word but the ministry of the ear. A still tongue can be a wise head yet dozens of splinters persist and pervade our planet.

The ministry of the ear can really be effective at a hospital bedside. Sometimes the best thing you can say there, is nothing at all! Just be present and listen, knowing that you don't have to have all the answers because maybe the answer is in your silence. As Baptist minister and professor, Howard Thurman, once taught, "Silence is the door to God."

This is why what Jesus teaches to his disciples about church conflict is so relevant for our day. Clearly, Christians can get into conflict with each other and we've seen that before splattered all over the news and tabloids. That's not really new to many of us but something caught my ear as I read

Jesus's words aloud for today. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member *listens* to you, you have regained that one. But if you are *not listened to*, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member *refuses to listen* to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender *refuses to listen* even to the church, let such a one be to you as Gentile and a tax collector." In a conflict, the role of listening is key, not speaking. Look at how many times listening is mentioned by Jesus. If the member with whom you have conflict listens to you, you have regained that one. But if that person doesn't listen, it will only expand the problem. If you don't listen to the one person, then one or two more people are brought into the situation, and if you don't listen then, the whole church is brought into it, and if you don't listen then, you are considered a pagan and tax collector; you become an outcast to the community. Refusing to listen creates a wider chasm and gap. Without a listening ear and heart, the divide deepens in any situation. The refusal to listen may be linked to the fact that we may have to listen to what we don't want to hear.

Bishop Hope Morgan Ward of the United Methodist Church believes that "It's essential that Christians learn to listen well and to honor the viewpoint of others." First, seek to understand; second, seek to be understood. How often have we heard, "You're not listening to me!"? Just talking past each other. One of the key principles in conflict resolution is active listening. If there are no listeners in a conversation, there's probably a lack of love because listening to the other is a form of love. Listening honors the voice of the other and is a commitment to really understand what is being said. Without it, no conflict can be resolved. This is why we have a stalemate on some many levels in this country. No one really wants to listen, revealing a lack of love; they only want to be heard. *Their* voice matters, but what about the voice of others?

"If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." What many don't realize is that the secret of reconciliation is listening. Listening is the path toward reconciliation and a portal to loving relations. We shouldn't have to go to the extent of fourth century Desert Father, Abbot Agatho who for three years carried a stone in his mouth until he learned to be silent. We might think that could be useful for some of our friends or colleagues! But the point is that we won't be the church God wants us to be without the ministry of the ear.

God has given the church, the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5) and listening is an initial step in that direction. We need truth and justice as well when dealing with reconciliation but it can't be all mouths; there need to be ears too. Without listening, a gulf is created between people in a community, moving them farther and farther away from each other. Even as one who doesn't listen is treated like a Gentile or tax collector, an outcast, keep in mind that these are the same people Jesus never gives up on. Though they may not listen, no one is out of the reach of God's forgiveness, mercy, and redemption. Jesus is always seeking to restore the lost. His parable of the lost sheep makes clear that the ultimate goal is to reconcile and restore to the community the one who has gone astray. And when Peter asks how often he should forgive, Jesus says, "seventy seven times," as a way to let Peter know that forgiveness is beyond all calculation. One shouldn't count when one cares. And the fruit of forgiveness can be so mind-boggling when you realize, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you" (Lewis Smedes).

This teaching about conflict is in a larger literary context of forgiveness which embodies the hope to bring back the erring, even if they don't listen well, even if they get on your last nerve, even if they call you everything but a child of God. In Christ, there's always the high purpose of redemption. Our listening is always *toward* reconciliation in the church and if listening can bring about

reconciliation, we'll need enough courage and strength to listen when it would be so much easier to speak all the time, on and offline. But remember, silence can be golden and "we have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak" (Epictetus). Like music, our words rise out of silence and flow back into silence. The Christian life is not all words and speech; it is also about pause and silence and presence.

There is one who never has to say a word because his presence says it all. If we listen and don't give into the hyper-speaking of this age that escalates today's conflicts, we may not only be reconciled with a brother or sister, we may ultimately be brought into the presence of God in Christ. Usually, when we hear "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you.... where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," we may think about prayer, but this isn't really about prayer in this biblical context. The two who agree refer to the two in conflict, the offender and the offended. If they agree on earth, if we agree on earth, Jesus will be present among them. Jesus doesn't have to say a word; he's just present. He's the place of reconciliation. Where we see it happen, Christ is there. Christ is in his own listening posture, blessing us with his presence.

When the civic and religious powers fought with Jesus, he was the innocent victim and the authorities were the culprits of oppression; they sinned against him, yet the irony is that he's the one who listens though it should be the other way around. We didn't listen. We were the ones who mocked him and beat him. We were the ones who hung him high and stretched him wide. We were the ones who sinned and created a chasm but he looked beyond our faults and saw our need. And then in an unbelievable gesture of love, he threw a lifeline to us, his body and blood, to bridge the divide and reconcile us to God.

Jesus wasn't the oppressor but the oppressed; yet he listened to us— "I love the Lord he heard my cry and pitied every groan.... I love the Lord; He bowed His ear, and chased my griefs away..." (Isaac Watts). He never said a mumbling word, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent (Isaiah 53); through it all, he listened to the curses, criticisms, and cries of anguish from the people. He listened to us in order to love us. He listened us into life. He embodied the ministry of the ear because he knew that was the way to God, the pathway to reconciliation.

So, if you keep on talking, you might be walking further away from others and God. The sound of your voice may never allow you to fully hear the still small voice of God. "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4). So, let us "hush" for as the Spiritual says, "somebody's calling [your] name."