

One Spiritual Practice for Community Ministers: Equipping the Saints - Part III: Prophetic Listening

By Rev. Cat Cox
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In my last column I (boldly) wrote: "The times call for boldness. Name and claim the mission! Go read or recite the Seven Principles - and then say aloud in the mirror. 'I am a community minister and a missionary for the principles of this faith that have the power to save the world.'" Here's a crucial - and challenging - spiritual practice for living into that.

Stop Arguing and Start Listening

I know. You're a little bit offended - because you think of yourself as a very good listener! And I'll bet you are! Except when you are really convinced the other person is in the wrong - and especially on a topic you feel a lot of passion about. Me, too.

Most of us have two modes of listening. One is listening in "pastoral mode" in which we extend warm, compassionate empathy to someone who is suffering, reflecting back what we hear so the speaker feels understood, gently offering new perspectives and suggestions as they are invited and welcomed. In this mode we easily align internally with the speaker's experience because, no matter how much it differs from our own, we too know what it is to be hurting and need companionship.

The other form of listening comes into play when we are in "prophetic mode," and it is very different. Notice how often, when you are listening to someone who is arguing for a point of view with which you deeply disagree, what you are doing internally as you "listen" is preparing your rebuttal! You are listening for flaws in the argument, chinks in the logical armor that your (much better formed) argument will pry open. This is listening in debate mode, and many of us are well-trained in it!

The only difficulty is that while we may win the argument, we are unlikely to win an ally who will walk beside us, working for the mission of this faith. Making our point has a place, of course, but some ways of approaching that work better than others if our goal is something larger than winning the debate medal.

"Loving the Enemy"... Are you kidding?!

I am with that wild-eyed Middle Eastern mystic, shamanic healer and noted social activist extremist, Jesus, who once called us - in words widely regarded by scholars as among his most authentic - to "love your enemy." We do this through prophetic listening.

Prophetic listening calls us to open to the experience of the person we are listening to, aiming to understand and reflect back our understanding of their experience just as we do in pastoral listening. It's only the most challenging, world and life-changing spiritual practice I've ever tried, and I am trying (and returning to beginner's mind to start again) every day. This is the praxis of "loving the enemy."

The reason loving the enemy is so hard is twofold, in my opinion. One is that we don't know how. The other is that we don't really want to. But how can we build towards the "tipping point" in which enough people are reaching across differences, overcoming their prejudices, fears, deeply seated beliefs and limiting group identities to join us in working for the mission of this faith any other way?

People do not change because you made a better argument that convinced them. People change because they have had an experience of being seen, understood and valued, and from there they also have been able to listen in new ways, and this experience of connection - both sides of it - has opened their heart to new possibilities and given them a glimpse of fresh hope for their lives.

That's the why of the spiritual practice of "loving the enemy" through prophetic listening. Next time: more on how.

Blessings on Your Ministry -

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