

## INTRO & CONNECTION to SERIES

A few weeks ago we introduced two metaphors, two word pictures that shape the way we envision and live within God's Story. These metaphors not only give us a picture of life with Jesus, they also help us discern the counter, lesser story that we most often settle for as we attempt to live a life transformed by faith in Jesus Christ.

**THE CIRCUS** is a picture of our culture and the rhythmic flow of our lives in which we are entertained at one moment and mechanisms for entertaining the next. Passive observers and mastered performers who live in a life of constant motion, yet going now where, telling no story other than the ever repeating story of consumption. Admittedly, the Circus is an attractive, fun picture! There is much to see and be wowed by; much acclaim to be garnered in the circus. Yet it is also unsustainable for there is no tempo for growth, only running hard then vegging-out.

**THE GARDEN** is a picture of life in the presence of God. A life in which we are participants in the various activities of the Garden. A life that has seasons, requires attentive work, and which has purpose in life, death and rebirth.

Our life of faith is played out in one of these two pictures; whether we embrace it, recognize it, or even fail to do so. *It is often because we have not identified the counter story to God's Story that our faith is loveless, lifeless, compromised in the midst of disillusionment, disconnection and the disorientation in the Circus life.*

In order for us to remain in the Garden life, we must stop being observers or performers; rather we must become participants. We must **CULTIVATE**. Cultivating is the act of fostering a healthy environment for growth, for life, for flourishing in participation with the elements of the garden—the seeds, the soil, the weather, the tools, the insects, the animals, and other gardeners.

*Cultivation begins when we recognize that our participation is in someone else's garden, namely God's!*

That is what our first two **FAITH PRACTICES** are meant to help us discover, rediscover, and remain within; the very reality that to be human is to deal with God. *Everything in our stories—past, present, and future; prosperity, oppression, happiness, sadness, longing, satisfaction, evil and good—is nestled within God's Story.*

Thus when we **PRAY**, we are not initiating conversation but answering God. The Psalms are meant to teach this. That all of our humanity is lived in relation to and response to the God who has created, who sustains, who has overcome all that is evil and broken, and who will one day restore fully a free life in his presence.

*It is in this Story, this Garden, which we find comfort, purpose, joy, and direction regardless of what season might be upon us.*

As we answer God, as all of our emotions, feelings, ideas of God and how the world is or should be, are exposed in response to who God actually is and has revealed himself to be; we discover that our faith is lacking and in-need of

redirecting. Thus we **REPENT**. We respond to God, and in his treasure which is the church family (Eph. 1:18), we hear that he has responded to us in Jesus' sacrificial work on the cross and powerful resurrection from the dead. Our faithlessness does not stop his faithfulness.

Indeed, in **Praying the Psalms** and **Practicing Repentance** we come to see that the Garden life is a life lived in **GRACE**. An intentionally crafted life in the presence of God is extended to us by grace and our participation in that life is maintained and sustained by constant and never changing grace. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, we are completely exposed before God and yet completely accepted by him in Jesus; thus we are to accept his daily invitation to participate, rest in him (Heb. 3-4). Therefore,

*When we have a picture of life as a garden in which we participate through cultivating—not taking more responsibility than is ours, nor taking less—our faith will grow in steadfastness, depth, and joy in the presence and pattern of our Father together.*

Our **FAITH PRACTICES** of **Praying the Psalms** and **Practicing Repentance** prepare us for *cultivating grace* in the everyday, ordinary context of the Garden life. They prepare us to wield the tools of...

LISTENING	Positioning ourselves to recognize grace in everyday conversations.
STOPPING	Removing ourselves from the circus life, even in the middle of it!
MINDFULNESS	Increasing our awareness of God's company and resolutions.
SABBATH KEEPING	Countering the rhythm of circus life with restoration and enjoyment.
FRIENDSHIP	Recognizing the grace in good friends and the need to work for them.
NURTURING	Cultivating grace in one another.
COMMUNION	The dialectical sustenance of life from death.

And, to do so with wisdom towards fruitfulness. In turn, as we begin to use these additional **FAITH PRACTICES**, our prayer life and repenting life are strengthened and sustained. Thus we are able to ever more increasingly remain steadfast in *cultivating grace*.

This afternoon, we are going to look at an often neglected but most readily available **FAITH PRACTICE** for *cultivating grace*: **LISTENING**.

## WHY LISTENING?

Perhaps when we think of spiritual practices or disciplines, listening is not the first thing that comes to mind. Yet, when we think about it, our first two **FAITH PRACTICES** include listening: we listen to God's revelation of himself and respond in prayer. Likewise we listen to our sisters and brothers speak truth towards our doubt, disillusionment, disconnection and disorientation as we are encouraged to cling to Jesus. Hopefully, even in our short time of Garden living through the **Praying the Psalms** and **Practicing Repentance** together has taught us that...

*...listening is very much a fundamental act of the life of faith.*

Yet, the Circus doesn't encourage listening. There are certainly a bombardment of sounds: noises and words, in the Circus. However, these sounds are only meant to draw our attention to the ring, to a new act to entertain; or command and direct us as we play our part in the spectacle. They serve the purpose to keep the cycle going and keep us from being able to deeply enter into what is happening in front of us.

*The sounds grab our attention but do not allow us to be attentive: for, there are no exchanges in the noise of the Circus.*

There can be confrontations, cheers, information communicated and even cries; but no conversations. There is no time. In the Circus we can respond to the noise but often doing so in a way that adds to the noise not fostering connection through it. If we are honest, is this not what most of the interaction on twitter, Facebook, Instagram and the like? Noise without relationship? Performing for others or gazing upon them?

Yet in the Garden life,

*listening is the primary act by which we **participate attentively** to what is going on right in front of us. For listening requires both seeing as well as hearing—an intimate, relational exchange.*

The **FAITH PRACTICE** of **Listening** is both auditory as well as visual. One author describes this discipline of **Listening** as "engaged attention",

"Engaged attention is different from the focused attention of an accountant scrutinizing a page of numbers for the sake of the mind's comprehension, detached from the knowledge of body and heart. It's also different from the unfocused, fragmented attention of media surfing. *Engaged attention requires openness to the other that involves one's whole self*, and this the state of contemplation.

Simone Weil wrote that **attention 'taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.'** *The person who is paying attention is trustingly open to the Spirit*, which is risky. Those who cultivate gardens lean in too, attending with all their senses to the plants under their care: what is noticed on the surface of a leaf in hue, curl or suppleness; what is heard rustling in the canopy of a tree; what is smelled, touched or tasted that informs the art of the gardener...

...Listening, and its visual form, beholding, maintain the life-giving connections we need to flourish.”<sup>1</sup>

We understand the fundamental need to **Listen** most definitively in the person and nature of Jesus himself. John begins his Gospel describing Jesus as one whom we hear and whom we see...

“In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things are made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the **light** of men. The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it...The true **light**, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him...the **Word** became flesh and dwelt among us, and we *have seen his glory*, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses [a healing rule to be listened to (Ex. 15:25-26)]; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (Jn. 1:1-18)

Jesus is the Word, *the spoken reality of existence, the observed reality of life itself* as the light that enlightens you and I. Jesus came to awaken us to grace upon grace; the truth of the world as it is and will one day be; the truth of God our Father and the Story we find ourselves living within.

In Jesus, we are given the most declarative, clear revelation of God—in his teaching, in his living, in his death and resurrection. Therefore, *Jesus shows us how we are to live in the Garden*. Specifically, Jesus says that he does only the things he sees the Father doing and speaks only the things that hears his Father telling him to speak (Jn. 5:19, 7:17, 8:26-47; 14:10; 16:13); and when Jesus is revealed in all his glory at the mount of transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8); Peter’s nervous chatter is met with the Father’s exhortation, “This is my beloved Son, **listen to him**.”

*Therefore, Listening—hearing and seeing—is our primary practice in following Jesus; in living a life of faith in the means and manners of Jesus.*

Thus **Listening** begins as we behold Jesus! Spending time with him in Scripture, in prayer, in worship with one another. *There is no replacing engaged attention on and with God by the Holy Spirit through Jesus*. We cannot simply discuss him in books or studies. Nor can we simply acknowledge him as we pass through our daily tasks.

**Listening** requires engaged attention; for listening is the act of building relationship. *Cultivating the grace of relationship* if you will! This is true with our relationship with God as well as one another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way,

“The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship is **listening** to them. Just as love of God begins with **listening** to His Word, so *the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them*. It is God’s love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we lean to **listen** to him.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*, 63-64.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 97.

It is in **Listening** to one another that we are able to discern grace, to discern the stories we are living in and recognize what God is up to directly in front of us: in the lives of each other and even in our hearts (1 Jn. 4:1-6)!

When we Listen—see and hear—one another in the Spirit three things happen:

## 1) WE BEGIN TO RECOGNIZE GOD IN THE ORDINARY:

There is an ideology within our Christian subculture that believes that only “deep” or “critical” or “spiritual” conversations are worth our time and energy. Therefore, our goal in every conversation is to turn it into an opportunity for “big talk: of Jesus, salvation, and the soul’s condition.”<sup>3</sup> While there are certainly times for these conversations and while I am not advocating for mindless chatter, there is something manipulative about trying to “turn” conversations. Or at least there can be.

If our mentality of **Listening** only comes with the idea that we need to get people to talk about deep things, then *we fail to take seriously what we have stated over and over again is true: the most fertile and prevalent ground for dealing with God and growing up with Jesus is in the ordinary, everyday life.* When we are listening only to turn the conversation to something deep, **we are not “likely to become aware of the tiny shoots of green grace that the Lord is allowing to grow in the back yards of [people’s] lives...abandon[ing] the very field we have been assigned to work”<sup>4</sup>!**

Yet, *when we **Listen** in the Spirit, we are grounded where the Spirit works* (Eph. 5:19-6:10), in the ordinary, everyday roles, relationships and situations of people’s lives. When “we simply [are] present and attentive to what is there conversationally, *as respectful of the ordinary as we are of the critical*” we are able to gain insights which “are only accessible while laughing” and others that “arrive only by indirection...*We are not trying to make something happen but to be a part of what is happening—without being in control of it*”, for “**we are convinced that the Holy Spirit is ‘beforehand’ in all our meetings and conversations.**”<sup>5</sup> We are able to observe in normal everyday conversations what God is doing in those we are listening to as we are “prayerfully” (Simone Weil quote above) engaged with them.

And thus, **Listening** allows us to participate! We begin to hear and see what God is at work doing and what part we are to play! And this happens in ordinary conversations, not just bible study times or confession times, or in deep conversations. None of which are inappropriate; yet neither are they the primary contexts for God’s working in people. Therefore they are conversations always open to us!

## 2) WE ARE SHAPED BY GOD IN OTHERS:

In our listening we are engaged by the Spirit, revealing our own heart, “It is as though God speaks through the one being listened to, sometimes with a corrective insight that stretches the listener’s heart, and sometimes with a word or phrase so striking to the listener that he or she feels attended to by God even while attending to the other.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 114-115.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*, 67.

Listening fosters mutuality, relationship. Listening keeps us from becoming conceited in our spirituality (Gal. 5:26-6:6). We learn as much from others as we give to them. God shapes us through others, not just shapes others through us.

### 3) WE CAN ENGAGE WITH EMPATHY:

Perhaps we need the **FAITH PRACTICE** of **Listening** now more than ever. By practicing *Listening*, we are able to engage with one another with *empathy*. Sympathy simply means I feel sorry for you. Pity is more about feeling like you are better than someone. Empathy is about identifying with and sharing in the struggle of another—whether you agree on everything or not.

In the midst of our political environment, with the racial tensions continuing to arise, with division amongst socio-economic classes widening; and so much more. The **FAITH PRACTICE** of **Listening** allows us to enter into conversations—in the Spirit—in a way that we recognize God in our supposed enemies, that we recognize that their plight is within his Story as well, and that perhaps we do not have everything right on our side either.

When we become a people who **Listen**—as we have been discussing it—we will be participants in reconciliation, ministers of reconciliation as Paul would exhort us (2 Cor. 5:14-21)!

These are the realities of the Garden life, of being ones who have been given the Spirit to allow us to hear and see and speak (Jn. 14-16; Heb. 8:10-12)! When we **Listen**, we participate with attentiveness! We are not merely spectators, nor are we performers, we are attentive to all that is going on in the garden and how we can *cultivate flourishing*.

So let's practice.

## PRACTICING LISTENING

**Listening** begins with beholding Jesus in Scripture. We listen first to the Lord and then we can listen to one another. So this afternoon we are going to take some time to **Listen** as we behold Jesus.

**Listening**, engaged attentiveness, is about *focus with a heart of care*. Hearing what is being said out of a genuine desire for the one we are listening to—caring about what he or she is saying, experiencing, communicating, and not. The same is true of Scripture. We have to enter into **Listening** with engaged attentiveness—focusing with a heart of care on God our Father in Jesus.

Since Jesus is not bodily in front of us, eyes to gaze into, body language to compliment what is being said; *the best way to keep focus is to engage with Jesus through what is tangible—Scripture*. The words of God revealing the Word of God to us keep our focus where it needs to be; and keeps us from making up God on our own.

So, we will take John 1:1-18 and Listen. Following these steps:

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to clear your mind of distractions and allow you to see and hear what is before you in the Scripture.
2. Read the text all the way through one time. Then quietly sit for 2 minutes. Letting everything slow down and beginning to focus on what was read.
3. Read the text all the way through for a second time. As you do, take note of what words, phrases, ideas stand out to you and why. Afterwards, take another 2 minutes to engage with God on these words and phrases, asking him to speak and for ears to hear.
4. Read the text all the way through a final time. Writing down and taking note of the words, phrase, ideas that God has laid upon your mind and heart. Spend 5 minutes writing down what God is revealing about himself, about yourself, and even actions for you to take.
5. Take these last few moments and respond to God—with repentance, with gratitude, with questions to continue to mediate on.

As you individually respond to God, we will corporately respond in communion.