

04/17/2016 -- Fourth Sunday of Easter C

“Plain Speaking, Plain Listening”

Scripture: Psalm 23; Rev 7:9-17; John 10:19-30

When I think of following Jesus, I run up against my strong and proud anti-authoritarian ancestry and being. I don't want people telling me what to do, and I don't like people claiming authority over me. And as a theologian and pastor, this conflict with following gets worse because our models for the faith are precisely people who “don't follow”. Jesus does not ‘follow’ the reigning authorities of the day. Peter doesn't care about authority; it doesn't even occur to him. He simply acts on what he feels. Thomas is always willing to challenge Jesus. Paul goes up against both the Jewish authority and the Roman court. Jesus goes to the cross in place of Barabbas, who is a revolutionary against the state. We are not given models of earthly following; we are given models of earthly rejection of authority.

“Following” in a Christ-following way means something different than what it means to follow a president or a priest or a minister or a person with money or someone with degrees and letters after their name. Following in the name of Jesus means worldly things get deconstructed, dismantled and redirected.

One of the most organized authority structures in the world, the United States Army, recognizes the problem earthly ‘following’ people and causes. They know that authority structures create patterns of thinking that are hard to break, ruts in choices with regard to commanding armies and planning attacks. So several years ago, some very smart people, at the request of generals in the Army created something called “Red-teaming”. If you want, you can download the 250 page “Red Teaming Handbook”, now called the “Applied Critical Thinking Handbook”. It is put out by the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, which is out of Fort Leavenworth.

Red Teaming is the act of gathering together a team from many sources for a single or ongoing situation. The team is from all levels of the organization and the members of the chosen team are given the authority to directly challenge leadership in order to help see through bias and blocks in planning. A Red Team is trained with the handbook, which provides ways to see through personal biases and experience, cultural biases and Westernized thinking patterns, logical fallacies, and group-think. This is the US Military that advocates this. Then the Red Team sits down with the mission critical team and breaks everything down, not to get answers, but to help those present to see through their biases and cultural blocks, so they can plan beyond set patterns.

In our Gospel reading today, we see Jesus confronting all kinds of cultural and religious roadblocks to his message. Jesus was out on the Portico of Solomon, a gathering place at the Temple in Jerusalem. There, the Jews, who had all kinds of questions for Jesus, asked him, *“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are <sup>i</sup>the Christ, <sup>j</sup>tell us plainly.”* Jesus' answer is not a great example of plain speech, but part of the problem is that he has already spoken plainly when these questions were asked before. Earlier, Jesus told them that he was the Son of Man of

which Scripture speaks. He told them he and the Father are one. But they didn't listen then, and they don't listen now, in front of the Portico.

*Plain speech* is a big deal in our culture now that we are in an election cycle. So let's begin by recognizing what *plain speech* is not. Plain speech is not speech which merely affirms my deeply held beliefs, and nor is it speech which merely confirms and conforms to the bias of the culture to which one is speaking. *Plain speech* is language that gets us closer to the truth of the reality we are facing; it is words and ideas that get beyond bias and culture and speaks to something deeper, common, shared.

But, there is another side to *plain speech* and that is what I want to look at today. The other side of *plain speech* is the ability to hear and listen, plain listening, or deep listening. And this gets to the key of what the real issue is in our story today. What are the people hearing when Jesus speaks to them? The issue is that the gathered Jewish people do not want to listen, or rather, they don't want to hear what Jesus has to say. Jesus says to them, "*I told you, and you do not believe. <sup>k</sup>The works that I do<sup>l</sup> in my Father's name bear witness about me, <sup>26</sup> but <sup>m</sup>you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. <sup>27</sup><sup>n</sup>My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*" To paraphrase, you want an answer you are unwilling to hear. If you were willing to hear, you would be following me.

Being able to hear plain speech requires what is called "deep listening", and this is what I think Jesus means by 'following'. Deep listening is also what is needed if we are going to speak plainly to others. To hear plain speech, we must listen plainly, deeply. Deep listening is the difference between hearing what we want to hear, and hearing what is actually being said. I suppose we could call what the Jewish people in our story are doing 'surface listening'. They want to hear Jesus say something that conforms to their worldview. They want to hear something that echoes off a tunnel that leads away from the reality of the present situation.

Is it any different for us today, in 2016? Are we really listening to anyone anymore, or are we just looking for people to agree with us when we listen to other people? Deep listening, on the other hand, requires an active and attentive approach that seeks to truly understand what is being said. Deep listening means we are no longer invested in answers, but rather in relationships. There is no end point defined by things we think we know.

When we are listening deeply, following becomes an integrated practice of deepening relationships with God and with others. Following Jesus becomes a continual reflection and discussion that seeks an ever deeper relationship with the Christ who has chosen us and those who follow Him. Deep listening requires that we constantly seek to fulfill Jesus' commandment to love God and one another. "Following Jesus", then, cannot reinforce an authoritarian worldview when we are listening for the *plain speaking of the Resurrected Christ*. Instead, following is deeply listening to Jesus' teaching, then going out into the world and finding out how well that teaching matches reality, then coming back to Jesus and *asking questions* about what we discovered, then repeating the process. Maybe our *plain speech* with Jesus and others is asking questions that help us listen more closely to what is going on with another person. In this way, deep listening and following Jesus become ways of deepening relationships, not a category and storehouse of answers to problems.

Following, or deep listening, becomes a spiritual discipline and practice that constantly confronts our bias, our worldview. It is easy for us, with the distance of time and accrued thought, to believe we know what is blocking the Jews from following Jesus in our reading today. This would be a mistake, though. There is great value in our joining that crowd at the Portico of Solomon today and asking ourselves, “Am I hearing the voice of the Shepherd, or am I simply hearing what I want to hear? How do I know Jesus is my Shepherd?” Deep listening is not possible until we see through our personal and cultural worldviews, until we are willing to confront our logical fallacies and even the group-think of our particular gathering of people. Following Jesus is not possible until we see through ourselves and make space for the voice of the Shepherd to lead us.

We need to be willing, if you will allow the metaphor, to *Red Team the soul*. Deep listening is the way we talk about “Red Teaming” in the theological world. We need to be willing to listen deeply so we can overcome our worldview and live deeply into the call of the One whom we call Shepherd. One writer says this about deep listening: *Deep listening makes a person more aware of moods, needs and motives as he or she goes about the day, improves the ability to anticipate situations and gives greater insight into what influences interactions and decisions. Over a period of time, the practitioner will learn about the various ways he or she reacts to different situations and thus be better able to respond rather than react to situations. Deep listening trains a person to lead out of a spirit of gratitude.*<sup>1</sup>

Red Teaming the soul means we see through our own bias and worldview against our soul and the soul of others. One of the interesting things about the Army’s Red Team approach is it is specifically designed to not give answers. The goal is not to give answers; it is designed to ask better questions of any given situation. This, I suggest to you, is also the goal of following Jesus - not to find answers, but to ask better questions of your life and spirituality. Deep listening does not work when we see ourselves as right, better, smarter, more moral, more civilized than others. It only works when we are committed to listening deeply for God and Christ in others and in the world, and we can only listen deeply when we are confronting those ideas and words that keep us from relating with others and with God.

Next week, we will look at specific ways to “Red Team the Soul”, and to listen deeply to the Shepherd who leads us.

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<sup>1</sup> From the article “Leading from Within” by Edward McCormack Ph.D. @ chausa.org