
THE DANGEROUS ACT OF LISTENING TO GOD

How many of you are theologians?

- Well, a theologian is someone who thinks about GOD,
 - therefore, everyone is a theologian.
 - Even atheists are theologians because they think about GOD, too.
- Theology is a way of thinking about GOD with respect to our lives.
 - What GOD expects us to do for a livelihood and how that relates to our faith is a theology of work.
 - How we relate to the environment and what GOD requires of us in terms of caring for creation is a theology of nature.
 - What GOD wants us to do in connection to others—how we treat them; how we respond to them—is a theology of relationships.
 - Joel Osteen’s message that GOD wants you to be rich and prosperous is a theology of wealth.
 - And, by the way, you won’t find that theology in the Bible.

Everyone has a theology.

- Unfortunately, many of us have a tendency to think that our personal theology is correct and absolute.
 - We believe ours is the TRUTH—and often we defend it as such.

That was the problem of Peter and most of the early Christian Church as we read their history at this point in Acts.

- They believed that GOD required circumcision before you could be a follower of JESUS.
 - In a sense, you had to become a Jew, before you could become a Christian.
- After all, GOD had required circumcision of Abraham and all of his descendants.
- And besides, it might be uncomfortable for me to have some of those “uncircumcised” people in my church.
 - (I can’t help but wonder if they had an inspection team to make sure these people were really circumcised.)

But GOD spoke to Peter in a vision.

- A sheet with both kosher and non-kosher—clean and unclean—animals is lowered down and Peter is told to eat.
 - Peter says he will not eat any of the unclean animals, but then is told that it is GOD who determines what or who is clean or unclean.
- And before you know it, Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile—unclean by Jewish standards—request Peter to come to his home in a nearby city, and Peter goes.
 - Listening to GOD can be a dangerous thing to do.

When the early Christian Church hears about Peter’s apparent indiscretion, so they decide to question him.

- Hearing this story today might raise some questions for us.
 - Well, at least it did for me and these are my questions:

1) Why did the early believers question Peter in the first place?

When I was on internship in a conservative North Dakota town, the church council at one of their meetings questioned my supervisor, Pastor Jim Hanson.

- He had been seen in a local bar and they wanted to know what he was doing in there.

- Pastor Hanson refused to answer them.
- He said, "I've been your pastor for eighteen years. If you don't trust me now, then we have a problem."
- Like the early Christians, they were making this an issue of control, rather than accountability.
 - We don't want a pastor who goes into bars.
 - We don't want a leader who associates with Gentiles.

2) Why were the believers concerned about the uncircumcised becoming Christians?

Were they worried that this might be displeasing to GOD,

- or were they worried that it might be uncomfortable for them if some of "those" people became part of the church.
 - What might those people be like?
 - How might they change our church?

3) How does GOD make us clean?

Through faith alone in JESUS CHRIST.

- Peter even says in his defense, "*So, if GOD gave them the same gift as He gave us (faith), who was I to think that I could stand in GOD's way?*"
 - That means that anyone who believes should be welcome in GOD's church.

4) What does this lesson mean for me or for us?

I think at the very least, it is telling us to let go of the control.

Throughout history, the Church has sought to be in control, especially when GOD has been doing something new.

- Maybe we should worship in the language of the people among whom we live?
- Maybe we could use the organ to accompany our worship?
- Maybe we could stop using the organ to accompany worship?
- Maybe women could have leadership roles?
- Maybe we could welcome "those" people into the church?
 - "Absolutely not. GOD wouldn't want that!"

The need to be in control comes out a fear of what might change, or how it might change, and most of all, that we might not like the change.

- So, the Church has tried to keep out or restrict the involvement of different groups, or more accurately, groups that are different:
 - prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans, the uncircumcised, women, blacks, homosexuals, foreigners, single mothers, alcoholics, divorced, and others.
 - And rarely is the question, "What is GOD doing?"
 - and mostly the question is, "What will happen to my church (and really to me) if they come?"

How quickly we forget the instruction of JESUS in today's gospel: "Love one another."

- Certainly, we can let that refer to only those whom we have chosen to let in.
- But JESUS chose to love the ones who didn't really belong,
 - and JESUS chose to love us, even when we don't deserve to belong,
 - so how can we do other than to choose love.

Understand, though, that choosing to love is full of challenges—
it is the dangerous thing that GOD tells us to do.

- Cases in point: Peter having to explain why he had dinner with an uncircumcised, unclean, Gentile,
- or JESUS having to explain to the disciples that they needed to love one another, even amidst the threat that any one of them might betray the community at any time.
- You see, JESUS' command to love one another follows the departure of Judas.

But this is exactly when we need to be reminded to choose love—when evil seems to be having its way;

- when those we thought were close, those we thought we could trust, abandon us;
- when the actions and words of others clearly come from hate and suspicion and prejudice—this is especially when we must choose love.

And our decision to love does not even have to be in the face of overt and extreme expressions of the opposite.

- Our lives are full of minor incidents when we can decide to come from a place of love rather than one of frustration and anger and judgment.
- “As I have loved so you should love one another.”

The disciples were encouraged to choose love in the aftermath of betrayal and in the midst of uncertainty.

- That is what JESUS means when HE says, *“By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”*

This is the kind of love JESUS is asking us to live—not for guarantees, not for reciprocity, not for security—but for the sake of a different kind of world.

- And so that by doing this, the world might move a little closer to knowing GOD's love.

Listening to GOD can be a dangerous thing.

- Often it can lead us to make uncomfortable sacrifices.

By the way, Pastor Hanson went into that bar because a recovering alcoholic needed support and couldn't reach his sponsor.

- He listened to GOD and he acted out of love for another.
- He also pointed out that those two council members who questioned him also had to have been in the bar to have seen him there.

Listening to GOD can be a dangerous thing.

- But it can also help us to see the world in a different way.
- When you love, you can more easily see the love that surrounds you.
- When you love, you can more readily recognize acts of love.
- When you love, you can more clearly sense expressions of love.

“Love one another as I have loved you,” is meant to remind us of the entirety of JESUS' love for us and for the world,

- a love that forgave enemies and welcomed those whom no one else would welcome.

It may be a dangerous act to listen to GOD, but it can lead to a life that loves unconditionally and makes us aware of how loved we are.

- And what better way to live?
 - Live dangerously. Choose love.