

I recall the story of a pastor who had this note on the side of his sermon: “Weak point, shout louder.” I thought of this in light of our passage this morning and in light of the news this past week of people who are upsetting congressional “town hall” meetings on health care reform by shouting down any dialogue. Their goal is to not allow any dialogue or conversation in these gatherings, according to several news sources. I wonder why. Are they afraid of hearing something, maybe the truth? What might be said that would be so disturbing to them? When did dialogue and conversation become dirty words? Something is wrong with a society when it loses its ability to converse with one another.

As I kept reading our Ephesians text this week for this morning I kept hearing Paul’s words and how they echo over and over again our need to listen to and understand one another. The key verse was 5:1 where he writes, “*Be imitators of God...*” We are to live and love as Christ lived and loved in our midst. The call is for conversation, understanding and dialogue.

Paul knows the Ephesians. He lived and ministered with them for two years (Acts 19:10). Paul is pleading for dialogue, understanding and conversation among these people who are breaking down centuries old walls of hostility. Former enemies, Jews and Greeks, are now worshipping in the same place. Barriers that once divided them are now gone. Men and women are worshipping together in the same place, maybe even side by side. We don’t understand how difficult that was. (Synagogues had a place for women away from the men. The Temple was constructed so that there was a barrier beyond which the women could not pass. Their lives were lived with barriers that separated and divided.) We are accustomed to being together. I remember how strange it was in northern Thailand going to some tribal congregations where the men sit on one side and the women on the other. One of the longest rides I had was in Chiang Mai where I enjoyed the “hump” in the back of a Toyota extended cab for several hours because the other man in the back with us could not sit next to a woman—his culture did not allow it. Barriers were coming down in the Ephesus congregation. And not only between male/female but slave/free. Masters were now side by side with their slaves in worship. Perhaps even the slave would have a higher standing in the congregation than the master—dialogue and understanding were needed.

It is easy to see how there could be misunderstandings and miscommunications among the Ephesians. “We don’t do things this way.” “We don’t eat this type of food.” How can they get along in such an environment? Paul’s words are that they begin to dialogue and listen to one another. The truth should be spoken, but spoken in love. Truth spoken in love is not shouted. Dialogue is not quenched.

Paul lists what should NOT be a part of our relationships with one another. I like the way Eugene Peterson phrases verse 31 in The Message: “*Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk.*” The NIV and NRSV tell us to put away bitterness, wrath, anger and rage. These are what keep us from getting along, from understanding one another. To engage in these things is like having a temper tantrum. Remember those 3-year-old temper tantrums. Since I don’t want to hear what you are saying I am going to shout so that even if you talk I won’t be able to hear you. And, I will be so disruptive that no one around will be paying any attention to what you are saying. This type of action is wrong from any perspective.

Now, is Paul only speaking to Christians reacting to other Christians? No! Paul is working to build up the image of the Church, the image of God in the eyes of the world. We need to be building one another up and demonstrating how life should be lived to the world. As we continue to grow and mature in the faith this is how we should interact with all people,

even those outside the church. We continue to grow as we learn how to communicate and dialogue with other peoples and cultures.

Tuesday evening we enjoyed the annual Seattle Baptist Union Clergy Dinner and Cruise on Elliot Bay. As we were waiting to board the boat we were talking about foods we grew up with. We mentioned how fortunate children growing up today are because they have a multitude of options which were not available to us growing up. I grew up in northern Maine and I don't recall a Mexican, Chinese, Thai or even an Italian option in restaurants. I mean, the only time we had southern food was when my aunt visited from the south! Today our grandsons have options and really like Mexican and Thai foods.

If we want people to understand us and hear us then we have to listen to them. The key is in conversation and dialogue, not shouting matches.

Paul writes that we are to be "Imitators of God." Read again and again how Christ interacted with people in the Gospels. I recall only one episode of anger. He cleansed the Temple after it had become a place of commerce rather than a house of prayer. However, most of the time we find Jesus listening and then responding. Often he responded by telling a story, a parable with no ending. He listened and heard what the people were saying. People could ask the hard questions and it was okay. He was trying to grow them up into a faith that understood one another and understood who God truly was and is. Psalm 34:6 says, "*This poor soul cried and was **heard** by the Lord...*" Our God listens. Should this not be the example we set with one another and with the world?

Paul also calls for kindness and compassion – not shouting down one another. It is hard to be compassionate and kind while shouting. For me, one of the earmarks of a growing congregation is one where people listen to one another and dialogue with each other, even with those who may not believe the way I/we do. Eugene Peterson continues the 31st verse: *Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly as God in Christ forgave you.*" We are called to be imitators of God's love and forgiveness – not God's wrath.

It is disturbing that many of those who are trying to shout down and stop conversation and dialogue in our nation today do it while waving Bibles in their hands. They seem to be saying that they are speaking for God. God though is a God who listens and hears as the Psalmist reminds us. They paint a picture of the church as one that is harsh and intolerant. They have failed to read and understand Paul's call on the people of God – to understand and to dialogue.

When we demand, shout and refuse to listen we damage the image of Christ.

When we fail to love we damage the image of Christ.

When we fail to forgive we damage the image of Christ.

When we fail to be "Imitators of God" we damage the image of Christ.

Our call is to grow the church. Our call is to build one another up, listen to one another and dialogue with the world. We are the image of Christ in the world. We seldom project a positive image when we shout at one another.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*, Zondervan, 2002