

Proper 19 2021  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
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Proverbs 1:20-33 Psalm 19 James 3:1-12 Mark 9:14-29

Sometimes a piece of art speaks to me, and probably to you, too. Former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold writes, “The Holy Spirit speaks many languages, among them the languages of art in all its forms.” The handprint pressed into clay that you or your child made, the quilt from grandmother, that particular set of antlers mounted on the wall, or the simple crayon drawing stuck to the refrigerator: it is art, and art speaks to us.

An editorial cartoonist caught my attention some years ago; his cartoon pieces are full of the voice of the people, expressive and poignant. When Barbara Bush died in 2018, editorial artist Marshall Ramsey penned a cartoon showing the golden gates of heaven, with the Bush’s child Robin rushing out to welcome Barbara Bush, “Mama!” home. Robin had died of leukemia at three years old. What a wonderful message about death and new life, about love that never ends.

The Marshall Ramsey cartoon that I have in my home is the one that he published on September 12, 2001. It is a “before” and “after” drawing.

“Before,” a line of diverse people have signs over their heads: Black; White; Conservative; Liberal; Yankee; Southerner.

“After,” those same people each have the same label over their heads: American.

For at least a few hours or days, we thought that we were united. In reality, we were not united even in 2001; the 9/11 terrorism fostered an anti-Muslim narrative. Just a few years ago, I listened to a Muslim girl talk about going to school in New York State and being called a terrorist. Her eight-year-old classmate, neither of them even alive in 2001, brought that pejorative language to school. “My daddy says you’re a terrorist.” New Testament writer James is right. The tongue is a powerful weapon.

“<sup>9</sup>With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

Those schoolchildren are both made in the likeness of God. The Americans in this editorial cartoon are made in the image of God. We can add many more divisive labels, forgetting that all of us are made in the image of God. Words can be lethal weapons.

Yesterday, along with Stephany Austell, Rebekah Webb and Steve Webb, I attended a “walk about” of the five candidates answering a call to be the ninth bishop of Upper South Carolina. One of the questions that each of them answered is how to have difficult conversations and remain together as one body of Christ. That is a critical question for all of us, beginning with one another. The answers focused on getting to know one another, to sit together, and to listen to one

another. I would add to listen deeply to one another, to listen to one another's lives without judgment. Have you ever been told that you are a terrorist just by virtue of being you? Me either.

Listening has long been a characteristic of the Episcopal church, and that action is rooted in our identity. We are united in what is called the "via media," which means the middle way, the middle ground. To stay "in the middle" of an issue when the culture around us pulls us to and fro is not easy – and essential to who we are. A faith culture of via media is united in **common prayer**, not in having identical beliefs. We unite by praying with those red books in the pews, allowing the prayers to become deeply imbedded in our lives. Praying such words as: "we are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table" might help us gain a posture conducive to listening with humility, especially when we are assured by the next phrase, "but thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy."

*We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table, but thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.*

Listening well takes action, honesty, humility ... and practice. Think about having a conversation with someone about a topic on which you disagree. To practice, the topic might be about sports teams or the best pizza – you get the idea. Now act, by praying. Pray before, during, and after the conversation, asking God to give you humility and grace: humility to set any emotions about your own opinion aside, in order to hear what the other person is saying.

When working in a hospital, I had a humbling experience about listening. I visited a daytime rehabilitation unit, and the first person I saw was lying on her back on a physical therapy table. No one was around. A little nervous in my chaplain role, I casually said, "working hard or hardly working?" I mean, clearly the woman was resting. "Working hard," she replied. I was in a car accident 18 months ago, and I just rolled over by myself for the first time." I was changed by her words of truth; I had not "listened" to her posture beyond it looking like a position of rest. In truth, her prone stance represented a year and a half of hard, painful, intentional work. I dropped to the table, we took each other's hands, and prayed prayers of thanksgiving, of praise.

This woman's voice is an example of wisdom:

*Wisdom cries out in the streets (or lies prone on a physical therapy table). ... how long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?*

I gained some humility that day, some skills of listening deeply. Through a stranger, I learned about grace: she accepted my nervous attempt at humor and chose to share her truth, her story, when she could have turned me away.

This is our work, friends: to be counter to a culture of fast answers, no listening, and polarizing opinions. We are not followers of Christ to make headlines. We are followers of Christ because in following him we find life. Not easy life, or always happy life, but life itself in all of its richness and challenges.

Jesus tells us about life as a disciple (that is who we are):

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

Taking up one's cross might mean suffering, taking on the rejection of the crucified Messiah. In a world that does not listen, be the ones who listen deeply, with open ears and hearts. There is almost no doubt we will be ridiculed for our stance of stopping and listening, really hearing, what is being said. We lose our lives, our egos and pride for the sake of Jesus Christ. We lose the life that we know and gain one that lasts forever.

*<sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*

We are one in Christ.

One in mourning over the lives lost on 9/11/2001.

One in praying for peace, the peace of the Lord and not of the world.

We are one in the languages of the Holy Spirit.

We are one body. Take good care of our body of Christ.

*Amen.*