

Training Ourselves to Listen Well

by Chris Schoon, director of Faith Formation Ministries

“God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason. You were meant to listen twice as much as you speak.”

I forget now who first admonished me with this bodily wisdom; it may have been a teacher, my dad, or some speaker at a youth gathering. I do recall joking about it with friends. It sounded a bit simplistic. But the phrasing found its way into my own conversations over time. My floundering applications aside, I’ve been discovering how listening serves as a central faith practice, teaching us to be more attentive to the Spirit than to our own agendas and priorities.

As a faith practice, listening involves training ourselves to recognize God’s voice (John 10:1-6) in the midst of all the other voices calling for our attention. It involves learning to be fully present in the moment, setting aside distractions that keep us from attending to and responding to God’s presence around us.

As we train ourselves to listen, two questions can help us: (1) Who are we listening to? and (2) How do we listen well?

Who Are We Listening To?

The simple answer could be that when we listen as a faith practice, we are listening to the Holy Spirit. However, the practice of listening forms us not only when we give attention directly to God, but also when we are attentive to how God speaks and works through other people and through creation.

Listening more directly to God often involves the practices of prayer and [engaging Scripture](#), but it can also involve other disciplines such as silence and solitude. The guiding posture that shapes listening as a faith practice is an expectant longing that God, who spoke creation into existence, will continue to speak with us today in ways that we can receive and comprehend.

Beyond these exercises of personal attentiveness to God’s voice, we also engage the faith practice of listening when we are attentive to other people. While we may be tempted to say that we hear God through pastors and other religious leaders, Scripture beckons us to recognize that we have the opportunity to see and encounter God in each person we meet.

Jesus connects our relationship with God to the people around us through the [two greatest commandments](#), by his emphasis on how we welcome him by welcoming children, in his parable of the sheep and goats, and in many other teachings in Scripture. God invites us to experience God’s presence, love, and character through other people. Listening well to another person ushers us into a mutual experience of extending and receiving God’s presence with one another. Not only does this posture help us hear God more clearly, but our act of listening well to others also recognizes and affirms the image of God in them.

Further, we are invited to listen to creation. In Isaiah 6:3 we hear that “the whole earth is full of [God’s] glory,” and the Psalms frequently depict the ways creation proclaims God’s majesty and goodness. If these are not enough of an invitation to listen to creation, Jesus’ parables overflow with creational imagery, revealing more of who God is through closer attention to creation. One of the church’s historical documents describes how God speaks through creation as “a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God” ([Belgic Confession, Art. 2](#)).

How Do We Listen Well?

Whether we’re listening more or less directly to God, or becoming attentive to encountering God in other people and through creation, three things can help us strengthen our practice of listening:

- **Consistency:** Listening to God is enriched through consistency. Proverbs 8:34 declares: “Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway.” As with any relationship, consistency helps to create space for learning to recognize God’s voice.
- **Patience:** Learning to recognize and understand God’s voice takes patience. We live in a culture that expects immediate results while ignoring how distracted, cluttered, and fractured we are. We need to *practice* listening because our attention is often divided in multiple directions. Learning to listen well means extending grace to ourselves by being patient with ourselves and realizing that it can take time for us to recognize the cadences of God’s voice.
- **Seeking transformation:** The spiritual practice of listening is different from many of the other ways we listen. The world around us trains us to listen for sound bites and to give our attention to bold headings. In order to process the volume of information coming at us, we have trained ourselves to listen in short bursts for essential information. Listening as a spiritual practice, however, involves a different posture. Instead of simply gleaning information about a topic, a person, or even God, we are invited to listen deeply in ways that reorient us and transform our relationships, our character, and our engagement with the people and world around us.

In his pivotal reflection on [Christian community in the book *Life Together*](#), Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “Just as love to God begins with listening to his word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.” We practice love—both love of God and love of others—as we learn to listen.

Invitation to Listen

As you explore what the faith practice of listening can look like in your context, you are invited to check out the Faith Practices Project's listening resources. These resources are designed to help you identify and engage in a variety of practical ways to grow in your capacity to recognize and respond to God’s voice. As you experiment with the practice of listening, we’d love to learn

alongside you. Share your practices with #CRCFaithPractices and tag us on Twitter (@crc_ffm), Facebook (@faithformationCRC), and Instagram (@crcfaithformation).