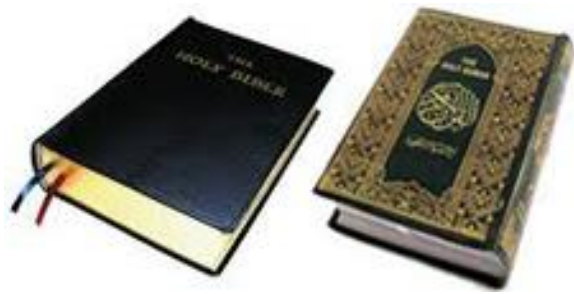


Is Anyone Listening?

Argument has become a way of life in our modern world. If you are a Democrat, you should argue with a Republican. If you are white, you should argue with a black. If you are wealthy, you should argue with those who are not wealthy. Everyone is yelling, screaming, posting, tweeting, scared to death to be caught flat-footed without a well-defined opinion. In our mad scramble to formulate and fortify our opinions, usually in a cozy atmosphere with like-minded people, little to no time is left for listening to the opinions of others, especially to those who have opposing views. But as history reminds us time and time again, when no one is listening, great danger is usually knocking at the door. And, when everyone is talking at once, how can anyone hear who's knocking at the door?

As many of you know, I have been in a small group with local Muslim friends for the past nine years. There are about 15 from my church and an equal number of Muslims in the group. We study our holy books together, discuss the traditions and practices of our different faiths, converse about current events, and engage in humanitarian community service projects together. At the



onset of this adventure, we drew up a document called, "Communities of Reconciliation," which established a road map for our conversations and laid out ground rules for our discussions. We agreed to refrain from argumentation, debate, or persuasive talk. Each group said to the other, "You be full-throttle Muslims and we will be full-throttle Christians. Let's allow the Spirit of God to sort out what is true between our two religions."

Perhaps for the first time in our brief history as a nation, Americans are experiencing a crisis of faith in our country - a crisis that there is no God, no ultimate truth, no overall morality to which we are each accountable. As a result, people are in a panic; everyone feels as if they are left to fend for themselves. Whoever can yell the loudest, have the most power, and persuade the most artfully, wins. Truth has become relative and the consequences are becoming dire. People have never felt more alone or scared because there is no anchor of truth to which they can tie their hopes, dreams and plans. Often without knowing, people are tempted to ask themselves; "Why listen carefully, pray reverently, or ponder more thoughtfully if there is no longer a Spirit of God to sort out what is true?" Greater anxiety, insecurity and fear is the result.

Jesus always took time to listen to the Father. He never wanted to do anything on his own. Jesus was the ultimate good listener. Just as Jesus listened to the Father, we are encouraged by Scripture to listen to him. The Bible tells us that if we listen to God, he will guide, fulfill, and empower our wills and lives. He will also give us

the ability through his Holy Spirit to listen intently and lovingly to others. No one lived more fully or abundantly than Jesus. He always listened to the Father before speaking or acting. As the Apostle John wrote in his Gospel, "Jesus said to them (his disciples), 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise....I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.'" (John 5:19,30)

One of the most challenging elements of the "Communities of Reconciliation" document occurs about midway through our program after tremendous trust and friendship has been established. The Christians are asked to download their stereotypes and prejudices about Muslims, while the Muslims are asked to just listen, absorb and hear the comments of the Christians. Then, the Muslims are asked to do the same, while the Christians are asked to listen. Few things are healthier or better for the soul than this kind of exercise. As honesty and truthfulness are expressed, you can feel tension and mistrust begin to leave the room. For this reason, the document emphasizes reconciliation. There is a great history of pain and hurt between Christians and Muslims. These pains and hurts need to be acknowledged and heard before healing can occur.

During a meeting last week with our Muslim friends, a most beautiful moment unfolded. While currently studying the life of King David as understood from our two holy books, we learned the Quran speaks very highly of King David as one of the great prophets of Islam. The Quran makes mention of the Psalms, which David wrote, but none of these Psalms are in the Quran. Most Muslims have never read a Psalm. For this particular meeting, we copied five of David's most well-known Psalms, so that we could read them together. Before we began to read, the Imam reminded us that Muslims believe that various parts of our Bible were corrupted and changed over time. But, after having said that, the Imam and the other Muslims in the room sat and listened to the reading of Psalm 145:



King David writing the Psalms

"I will exalt you, my God the King: I will praise your name forever and ever.
Every day, I will praise you and extol your name forever and ever.
Great is the Lord, most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom....
My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
Let every creature praise his holy name forever and ever." (Psalm 145:1,2,21)

When we finished reading the entire Psalm, all 21 verses, the Imam was greatly moved. He could barely speak. He said that this was one of the most beautiful things he had ever read. I asked him to pray to close our evening, but he said he could not pray because Psalm 145 was a perfect prayer that could not be added to. He was clearly moved by God's Spirit of truth.

When people do not feel heard, they usually become angry, and some become violent. Much strife in our world today is the result of people not taking the time to listen to one another. Listening is love, and love is listening. When a person feels as if no one is taking the time to listen to them and hear their story, great distress develops in their souls. Loving thy neighbor as thy self requires a discipline of listening. You cannot love your neighbor if you are not taking the time to listen to them.

In recent months, I have received numerous invitations to speak at churches that are eager to establish a friendship and dialogue with their Muslim neighbors. I have shared many stories from my relationship with my Muslim friends in the Chicago area. As a result, an increasing number of churches are reaching out to their Muslim neighbors in a spirit of love. But, many Christians are also catching and adhering to the bigger message of reconciliation. In so many segments of our society today, divisiveness and mean-spiritedness are taking over our public and private discourses. There has never been a greater need for grace, forgiveness, love and reconciliation in our society as a whole. People need to hear the teachings and life of Jesus afresh. They are discovering that life without grace, forgiveness, listening, and love is miserable.



Listening requires genuinely being interested in other people. It means resisting the temptation to think only about oneself. It requires the discipline of quieting our own tongue so we can hear the heartbeat of other souls. It means being more like Jesus. To the degree we listen, we can be used by God as peacemakers in our own families, towns, countries and world. The opposite of divisiveness is unity, and unity is the most important ingredient of community. For these reasons, the Apostle Paul wrote these famous words to the people in Philippi; "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3,4)

May God our Father bless each one of us as we reach out to our neighbors, and listen.