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Mark 9:2-9

ACTIVE LISTENING

"Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

We call this biblical story the Transfiguration because of the way Jesus' appearance was so transfigured while standing up on that mountain. We might think about the Transfiguration as the Gospel of Mark's version of a Super Bowl half-time show. It comes just about half-way through the gospel account; it too offers a fantastic light show; there is even the inclusion of celebrity figures--Moses and Elijah; and it takes places before an awe-struck audience--the disciples who are overcome by what they see.

But after all the dazzling visual effects, God speaks. And God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." Listen to him, we are told. That's what we Christians do, don't we? We are followers of Jesus, those who listen to his message and do what he says. Or do we? Could it be that we his followers are prone to some degree of selective hearing, where we listen to some of his teachings but not others, where we think we have heard him but maybe haven't listened all that carefully? As we know, there is a difference between hearing and listening. Listening involves more than just an auditory experience of taking in sound. Listening means

comprehending what is being said so that it can inform us and shape us. Do we really *listen* to Jesus?

That got me to wondering about the things Jesus says. What are they? So I went through the Gospel of Mark and made a list of what Jesus said. Here are some of the words Jesus says in the course of his ministry which we may or may not be so good at listening to:

"Repent and believe the good news," Jesus says right at the start of his ministry. How good are we at owning up to our own imperfections and the ways we have failed to follow God, rather than blaming others? In our age of cynicism, how ready are we to embrace good news, to promote the good news of God's love and God's presence rather than to participate in the bad news of greed, anger, selfishness, and negativity all around us?

"Follow me," Jesus says, but as those who are accustomed to following Twitter or Instagram, or following the stock market highs and lows, how much attention do we give to following Jesus each day?

When healing a man, Jesus first says to him, "Your sins are forgiven." Have *we* taken these words to heart or do we carry the weight of our past around with us, unable to embrace the new life Jesus makes possible? *Or*, do we perhaps deny that we have any sins that need forgiving?

Jesus offered a new perspective on the purity codes of his day when he said that a person wasn't defiled by the foods they took in through their mouths but rather, he said it was "the things that come out are what defile." Have we considered the ways our words may have polluted a relationship, harmed a loved one, shamed ourselves?

Jesus said that those who want to be his followers must "deny themselves and take up their cross" and follow him. It kind of puts to rest any notion we might have that being a faithful Christian will lead us to a life of worldly success, popularity, and riches.

According to Jesus, "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." He also added that, "whoever wishes to be great must become a servant" to others. How might that affect our efforts to secure privilege and status, our feelings of entitlement?

Jesus said, "whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone." I think maybe our prayer time might just have gotten a whole lot longer and a whole lot harder.

Listen to this Jesus tidbit: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." In fact, he adds, a camel would have an easier time going through a needle's eye than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. If his words make you uneasy, then join the crowd. Considering the economic status of much of the world's people, those of us in this room could be considered millionaires. Jesus gives us wealthy people a warning, a health warning like one of those surgeon general's warnings about smoking. Be careful of money, very careful. We are challenged to consider how we use our money or how we fail to use it for God's purposes and the impediments our financial wellbeing put on our hearts and souls.

We know that we are supposed to love God, but according to Jesus, not only are we to love God with all our heart, souls, minds, and strength, but we are also to "love our neighbor as ourselves." Not just those neighbors we know. Not just those neighbors we like. Not just those neighbors who are legal citizens, who come from good families, who look like us, who worship like us. We are supposed to love and care about the wellbeing of everyone. Everyone.

I don't know about you but I find these words of Jesus daunting. Most of them are really, really hard to carry out. And there are so many other voices that invite us to listen to them and

we get easily swayed. Think about all those other voices we listen to: the advertisers, the politicians, the voices on social media, all offering up other values and perspectives, things like greed, and revenge, and power through might, and anger, and hate, and striving to get on top, and suspicion of others. And these other voices invite us to listen to certain voices within our own hearts and minds: to listen to our anger, to listen to our desires and wants, to listen to our feelings of jealousy and our feelings of entitlement, and especially to listen to our fears. Many of the voices swirling around us in the world encourage us to listen to the childish parts of our selves-- and we all have them. Small children act out of anger. Small children act out of jealousy. Small children seek what they desire without thought of others. Small children act out of fear.

But Jesus calls us to maturity. When we listen to Jesus, we are challenged to grow into more mature people. And growing up is never easy. Growing up, growing mature requires a level of effort and discipline. And that is why we have a teacher like Jesus.

It is one thing to admire Jesus. It is quite another to follow him. The Church is not a place for Jesus admirers but a place for disciples of Christ--those who want to follow him. We gather together in part because the way of Jesus is challenging and we need one another to help us on the journey.

In a short while we will ordain and install new officers of this congregation. The ordination and installation litany reminds us that these individuals are not taking on a position of status but rather a position of service. They are committing themselves to helping us become followers of Jesus, not merely admirers of Jesus. Their job is to help us listen to Jesus. We strive to listen to Jesus, that means hearing and acting upon what we hear, so that we too might find ourselves transfigured through the power of God.