
Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak and a Strawberry Milkshake Never Hurts

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The Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
August 30, 2009
Proper 17 B
The Cathedral of St. Philip: 8:45 & 11:15
James 1:17-27

When I was between the ages of twelve and fourteen, I spent a number of summers at my Grandparent's farm in Austinburg, Ohio. They lived in an old farm house that my grandfather had been born in during the early 1900s. It was a white with black shutters. The attic where I slept had a staircase with a wooden banister that evoked the deck of a pirate ship. I had always loved visiting there and the opportunity to be there by myself was always a particular treat.

They were magical and simple days filled with instant Country Time lemonade made in tall brown glasses, card playing, and evenings watching for the deer to come out around dusk. It was during these summers that I first learned to swing a golf club. At the appropriate hour I'd collect the old berry basket filled with beat up range balls. I'd hit the balls out into the field off an old piece of green shag carpet stabilized with a piece of plywood underneath. My grandfather, who by that time could not see well, would comment from a distance on my swing based on the sound of the contact he could hear. My grandmother stood closer, telling me when I had lifted my head prematurely or gone too far around on my backswing. When the basket was empty, the three of us would walk the field picking up the balls to begin the next round.

The rhythm of our days was as structured as any liturgy. We'd rise in the morning, and eat our breakfast--usually poached eggs on milk toast or fried eggs and bacon. My grandfather would then suggest we move to the "drawing room" to drink our coffee. The day would commence with my exploring the outdoors until lunchtime. Lunch usually consisted of some type of sandwich on white wonder bread, a luxury not allowed in my home in Maryland.

The highlight of the afternoon would come around three p.m. My grandmother would look at me and say, "Why don't you go out to the garden and pick some strawberries?" That was all the encouragement I needed to grab a bowl and race to the field. As soon as the bowl was full I'd dash back to the kitchen. She'd be waiting with the blender and a huge container a Schwann's vanilla ice cream. We'd make three giant strawberry milkshakes and take one to my grandfather sitting in a porch swing that had been placed out under a tree. We'd sip the milkshakes and the stories would begin. I'd often hear of how my grandmother and grandfather had fallen in love and run away across state lines to elope after she graduated from high school.

I felt content, known, and loved in those times. They were simple and in some ways unexciting, but they are some of my most treasured memories. Whenever I hear in the scriptures about the offering of first fruits, I can't help but remember dashing out to the strawberry field. Those ripe precious berries, became transformed into something holy with the addition of vanilla ice cream, the telling of stories, and my grandmother stroking my hair.

"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."

The agricultural offering of first fruits in the Hebrew scripture reminded the community that the health of the harvest and their ultimate ability to survive was all gift. While many of us do not literally gather and grow what ultimately feeds us, still, all we have is from God. By offering some of that harvest back to God, we acknowledge that our whole sustenance is a gift from above. Whether our offerings arrive in baskets or tied with a rope around their neck or in gold offering plates, the bearing of them to altar has the same purpose. We remember that we rely upon God and we do that in the context of the gathered community.

Each time we come forward to the rail either in thanksgiving or to offer a need we are acting out our faith. As Canon Wiggers so beautifully reminded us last week, we bear things to the altar, so they can be consecrated and returned back to us as the Body and Blood of Christ. And it is our response to that gift that the Letter of James invites us to remember today.

The reading today reminds us that in our reception of the Word through scripture and the sacraments, we are transformed ourselves. We are now called to become first fruits ourselves—a visible symbol of God's love in the world. James doesn't just let us fantasize about what being a first fruit looks like. He's actually rather specific.

"Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

After returning from a month of silence, you might think that the last thing I would be able to do is be slow to speak. But whether you've been away or never left, our culture encourages us to speak first and listen later. The more we speak and insist on being the center of attention, the less likely we are able to be a visible first fruit that encourages others to be reminded of God's generosity.

Speaking without listening is the same as holding onto all we have and forgetting it came from God in the first place. We become guarded and isolated. All that we have is not part of a broader community created and sustained by God, but our own stockpile that must be protected at all costs. We are not likely to care for the marginalized out of compassion and gratitude, but jealously guard what we have and attack anyone who tries to take what is ours.

We forget that it was never ours in the first place.

Many have asked since my extended retreat whether it was hard to not talk for so long. Strangely, in many ways this was the least challenging part of the retreat. Far more challenging was discovering my tightly held illusions of control. I could not escape the inner dialogue that we are always engaged in. In the silence you start to listen to yourself and become far more aware of the fear that drives so many of our responses. By not talking to those you are traveling with, you instead see how you react to the smallest of community challenges. My own pettiness became a mirror I had to stare into when I became frustrated if my housemate rose earlier than I wanted them to or failed to leave me enough coffee in the morning.

But in addition to my limits, I gradually became more and more aware of the smallest of generosities. A quiet smile or singing a hymn in community became more precious simply because it was the only outward connection we shared. Realizing that someone had noticed your empty plate before you looked up, created a connection of hospitality that no polite banter could have fostered.

I found over time that my eyes and ears became attuned in ways that never would have been possible had I been engaged in my usual levels of conversation. I became reconnected to nature in ways that were reminiscent of summers on my grandparent's farm. Even the miracle of a spider web could stop me in my tracks to contemplate the generosity of God. The choruses of singing frogs after an afternoon shower were as glorious as any anthem I've heard in worship.

But perhaps most precious each day was the meeting I had with my retreat director Fay. This was the only time I was permitted to speak on a regular basis. I had to choose my words carefully, summarizing hours of silence in a few brief phrases. What I remember is not what I said, but how Fay listened to me. Having spent decades of her life in prayer, she

understands the call of James to listen quickly. When I would sit down to talk to her, she was fully present to me. She celebrated with me in times of joy and comforted me in times of despair. She might only share a few insights during our time together, but they were full of wisdom and insight. It was through that time that I then was able to continue my journey in silence. My own ability to trust was deepened by her companionship and I found myself discovering God in new ways.

It is impossible to know what the full fruits of that time will be in my life, it is simply too early to tell. But the opportunity to be in community with people who take their primary identity from prayer and a relationship mediated by God is a powerful witness to the first fruits of religious life.

It is something that we are called to do here in this community. We do not have to live in silence or adopt monastic lifestyles to turn our ears towards one another. If we find ourselves easily angered or engaged in mindless frenetic activity, we are not remembering the generosity that has already been showered on us. If we are not caring for the orphans and widows or any in distress, we are not embodying our call to be harbingers of God's grace in this world.

All that we have, all that has come to us to make us who we are is a gift. It is not all easy and we would not necessarily choose all that we have received. But it is still all a gift. The more we are able to receive ourselves and one another in that spirit, the more we will create a community that is full of grace and love. The most important things we will do here at St. Philips will not be in what we say, but in what we do. If we listen deeply and receive one another as gift, we will become first fruits for one another and for the world. We will become the Body of Christ. Amen

Comments? Contact Beth Knowlton at: BKnowlton@stphilipscathedral.org