

Are you Listening? Well that may depend, do I want to hear you? Good News, yes I want to hear that. Bad news, work assignments, nagging, I don't want to hear that. We call this selective hearing, which some people tell me is really prevalent among teenagers and husbands.

Our lessons today deal with listening, active listening. Listening that changes people. I know Lutheran don't want to change, but this time I think we better listen and be changed by Christ.

Jesus in our Gospel lesson says, *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”* (Matthew 18:15, ESV)

Notice here the listening is being connected to repentance, that is confession which receives absolution. Do we as Christians need to repent? The answer is yes, because we are sinners. Before we go to far we need to back up. Our Gospel lesson for today begins with the disciples coming to Jesus with a question. Who is the Greatest? You almost can picture Jesus shaking His head and rolling His eyes. This is just as bad as when siblings who argue which one them mom loves the best. When I was growing this was an easy answer, it was me, but then again I am an only child. But for the disciples this created a lot of energy that only Jesus could settle. Instead of giving the mom answer, I love all of you the same, Jesus does something different. He says, *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 18:3, ESV). This turning is the repenting part, turning from your selfish sinful attitude and confess that you are a sinner and need a savior, otherwise you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. In case you missed it, Jesus isn't mom. Actually Jesus does love all people, but not are people will be with Him in heaven.

If our Old Testament reading was extended 2 more verses, you would see why Jesus doesn't give the mom answer. God is speaking through Ezekiel, *“Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”* (Ezekiel 33:11, ESV)

Can God do that? Send people out of heaven in to hell, because they do not repent? We may want to think that a loving God must save all people (the Mom answer), and actually God does desire all people to be saved, but not all are going to be with Him in heaven.

In our Lutheran Confessions, Martin Chemnitz writes in the Formula of Concord:

First, that God wants to receive into grace all who repent and believe in Christ; second, that he wants to punish those who arrogantly turn away from holy prayer and entangle themselves again in the defilements of this world (2 Peter 2[:20*]), who adorn their hearts for Satan (Luke 11[:24*, 25*]), and who outrage the Holy Spirit (Heb. 10[:29*]). Moreover, if they persist in their sins, they will be hardened, blinded, and eternally damned.¹

God is serious about repentance and turning away from sin and toward Christ. After the disciples get the lesson Jesus continues with the temptations to sin. Jesus notes that temptations to sin and sin will happen, but as Chemnitz notes “those who arrogantly turn away from” God as our Gospel says, *“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”* (Matthew 18:7, ESV). The bottom line: there is death.

¹ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (654). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Jesus is so adamant about this He notes that whatever the cause, cut it off and throw it away. Now if I cut off every part of my body because of sin, there would be nothing left. Besides the idea is not that Jesus is promoting some sort of self-mutilation, but something else that also comes from the prophet Ezekiel.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:25–26, ESV)

What a beautiful illustration of Holy Baptism, and the cutting out of the heart of stone which we were born with, that will not listen nor turn to God, to be replaced by a heart of flesh, not sinful flesh, but living flesh that will repent, turn and listen to God as the source of life and life eternal, all because of Holy Baptism. God gives grace, the new heart and a new spirit, so that we will have life. Through Holy Baptism we bear God's name so He has a vested interest in you, for you belong to Him.

So the Gospel of St. Matthew then continues with the parable of the Lost sheep, as Christ is the shepherd who goes after the lost one, and rejoices when the sheep is returned. He also has angels connected to us.

I will admit the concept of Guardian Angels is a topic that often perplexes Christians, but we note that the Gospel just names it, that they are there. The angels are not to be prayed to nor invoked, but they do the will of God because they always see the face of the father, who is in heaven.

But there is a bumper sticker theology that is humorous. Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly. There is one level of truth here. If you can imagine that breaking speed limits is an angel limit, we have a parallel. God loves and redeems us. We bear His name in Holy Baptism, angels assigned. God however is pushed away from us when we sin, deliberately and intentionally. So our deliberate disobedience that pushes away God also pushes away the angels and ultimately pushes away good Christians and friends.

So if your brother sins against you, and is pushing God out of his life, what do you do? You don't push back, you don't over react, you don't explode saying how can a Christian do such things? Nor do you ignore your brother saying if he wants to leave let him leave. The two extremes to be avoided here are overacting and doing nothing at all.

The idea as St. Paul notes, *“Rather, speaking the truth in love”* (Ephesians 4:15, ESV). Care enough to confront in a loving manner, for someone's soul is at stake. Hell does exist and with our Savior we should not delight in filling up hell. Even if it means risking and stretching ourselves to speak the truth in love, because naturally we don't want to. The goal here is for all people to listen, to turn from sin, for sin pushes away God's grace. Repentance is turning toward God's grace.

What if people don't want to listen, turn, that is repent?

In Scott Peck's book, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, this psychologist writes:

It is not their sins per se that characterize evil people, rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of the evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it. [p. 69]

He continues by saying,

Spiritual growth requires the acknowledgment of one's need to grow. If we cannot make that acknowledgment, we have no option except to attempt to eradicate the evidence of our imperfection. [p. 74]

Like a cancer, that needs to be removed from the body for the sake of the body, the person not listening, turning, repenting, ultimately not really needing a savior, needs to be removed from the body Christ.

Yes, it is that important, for God's grace, love, forgiveness is that important. It is life and life for eternity. For if we take it for granted, not appreciating any of it, then we have refused to listen to God's word turn and repent, which is turning our living heart back to stone. Which results in removal from the body of the Christ.

However, if you want forgiveness, Christ freely gives of Himself for you. He feeds you with forgiveness from His Word and with His own body and blood, the Sacrament, the Eucharist.

It is here freely for you, Are you listening?