

HEY, HEY, ANYBODY LISTENING?



Many years ago our youth choir at Trinity sang a little song by Avery and Marsh that caught our attention at Christmastime and has continued to be a favorite of mine. It begins like this:

Hey, hey, anybody listening? Hey, hey, anybody there?
Hey, hey, anybody listening? Anybody there?

As I read the correspondence between churches and denominational agencies, letters to the editors of various UCC publications, attend the endless meetings that always seem to be promoting the coming of God's reign upon the earth, this little song comes back. As I listen to others – and to myself – I am aware that we live in a day of much speaking but precious little listening.

For instance, my wife tells me there is nothing wrong with my *hearing* it is my *listening* that needs some work! We really need to listen with greater intensity to one another, counselors tell us, to hear the unspoken yearnings of hearts unable to put into words those feelings which seem too personal, too fragile, to risk bringing into the open. This is true, not only for our personal relationships, but also for our local and wider church connections as well. One of our church volunteers—responding in frustration when I apologized for insisting on something that caused her a real inconvenience in her area of responsibility—said it quite simply: “You don’t listen.”

I tend to have my head in the clouds quite often, seeing only the particular task I am engaged in, and not always paying attention to what is happening to those around me. Some say that is the way men are. But I know that is not true. It is not the way I want to be.

Some years ago, when our church had purchased a former elementary school in which to expand our church's daycare ministry for the community, I was burning the candle at both ends - and in several places in between as well! The demands on my time and energy were beyond my capacity, but we were gathering for daily prayer at the church, and I was oblivious to everything but the job to be done. I was flying high! It finally caught up to me, and I came crashing down to earth in the midst of one of the most fearful times of my life.

Getting the message quickly, I began to slow down and care for myself, and was amazed at how out of touch I had become. As I was coming on the other side of that experience, I asked my wife: “When do you think I will get back to normal?” “I hope never,” she replied without hesitation. That told me more than I could ever imagine about my real state of being. We can get so caught up in our own agendas and plans and goals that we fail to listen – even to those closest to us. Thank God that most

of these folks love us enough to see us through, speak the truth when we need it, and forgive us when we run roughshod over their own lives in the process.

The uproar in the United Church of Christ over various issues that divide us into all sorts of camps has often become quite bitter. I remember telling the Association in one of its meetings that if such and such an action were taken, we were gone as a congregation from the United Church of Christ – and I meant it, as everyone could tell from the emotion and anger with which those words came forth.

Over a year later, I stood on the floor of the Association one again to apologize and ask forgiveness of our pastors and lay representatives for that outburst. “I have not changed my mind or position on these issues one bit,” I said, “but I had no right to speak in that tone or to issue such an ultimatum. What I said may have been truth, but it was not spoken in love, and therefore I was wrong in what I did. Please forgive me.” And they did. Many came up after the meeting to speak to me and to embrace me – some with tears running down their cheeks.

They would not listen to me bore, I had felt. But neither was I really listening to them. We were in two camps over against each other and deeply entrenched in our own emotions. That will never serve the cause of Christ.

Speaking the truth in love, which St. Paul encourages in Ephesians 4: 15-16, requires us also to listen to the other to whom we are speaking, to embrace that other as a child of God, to hear what is behind the words, even though unspoken, and to be open to their concern and heartache as deeply as we are to our own. This kind of speaking and listening in the church leads to *real* communication where walls are not built up but rather dismantled.

When we listen to one another in this way, walls come tumbling down! We do not have to accept one another's differences, but we do have to accept the other person with whom we differ. We are one in Christ, not because we agree on everything, but because Christ died for us all.

The end of the song with which we started proclaims, “I've got Good News, Good News!” The result of listening is hearing – hearing the Good News that Gods loves us all and is working on our behalf to make us one!

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