

Easter 4B

Lections: Acts 4:5-12; Ps. 23; 1John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

This week's conversations in relationship have shaped my understanding of today's texts. Two of those for whom I wrote letters of recommendation have been accepted as postulants for ordination; one other friend was rejected. On Thursday we had a letter from the bishop with instructions for communities concerning our health practices during the worries about swine flu (we cannot pass the peace to each other in the usual way), and on Friday evening I had dinner with a dear friend who is back from the dead. We kept a prayer vigil for him while he was in hospital in Montreal, fighting for his life. So I am thinking about relationality in God, in religious friendship, in our vocation as Christians during this station and season of resurrection.

As a seminary student one is mightily intimidated by the preaching task because in daily chapel or classroom one hears mightier brains, stronger faith and better words. I often felt that my pithy Anglo-Saxon sermons were like Lincoln logs constructions next to the likes of Henry Nouwen, William Sloane Coffin, James Forbes and all the other luminaries. My images were less than perfect and of course, I didn't want to dishonor my school. Imagine my dismay when one of our preaching professors had the same text in chapel that I had been assigned to preach in my student placement. We had come to different conclusions about the meaning of the text, its homiletical baseline and hermeneutical shifts. I left the chapel anxious and not strengthened, doubting for the umpteenth time whether I could fulfill my call as preacher.

When Prof. Muehl appeared at coffee hour, I pounced on this unsuspecting man who had never had me in his preaching class.( because I was a commuter, coming into New Haven only three days a week, not hanging around after classes because I was a mother of three young children and had to get home and make dinner!) Although he had precious little time to himself he responded to my anxiety and said, gruffly, "Meet me in my office in ten minutes and I will listen to your sermon."

When we got there I was embarrassed and hesitant before this sermonizing giant. I didn't trust myself or my words and looking at another master wordsmith, I nearly lost what voice I had. He lit a pipe and stretched out in his recliner chair, closing his eyes. He spoke quietly but forcefully, "let's hear it."

Perched on a stiff chair, I am sure I sighed – I always do when I'm under stress and then I began to read the words. Somewhere in the middle they took on a life of their own and I let them have it. Through it all this gentle spirit listened, just listened to how a living word was living in me. Bell Hooks calls it hearing each other into speech. We were for that time fellow travelers on the spiritual journey, breaking the bread of life together, affirming the work of all of us as we live in response to the One who is Life. Bill Muehl has gone to his reward now and I remember him with gratitude.

Today's scriptures give us some insight on relational power between those who speak and those who listen. The disciples Peter and John had been arrested and questioned

about their witness. The healing power in Jesus' name will not be silenced but we have no clue about what the accusers really heard....maybe there was respectful silence but those who held a different power and authority will try to disrupt and destroy those who claim faith in the name of Jesus.

Jesus, in John's gospel, says something new and different and we wonder how it was heard. He claims that he laid down his life and took it up again and urged the disciples to lay down their lives for others too. This station of resurrection is not about what happened **to** him but it about **what he did**. His own power and authority in relationship with God and with others shows us a portrait of risen life unlike the other stories in the synoptic gospels. Relational power, deep intimacy and true listening are here. We are called to lay down our lives and take them up again too.

Prof. Muehl wrote a book, entitled Why Preach? Why Listen? And some days I am in awe of you all for coming to worship to take in a little of what I offer as preacher. Others who speak from this lectern place also wonder how it is that you are willing to listen so well. Our lives are in response to the question, what think ye of Christ? What do you think of a good shepherd who desires our safety, our healing, our words of belief? In the midst of all sorts of cautions about swine flu, in the midst of spring tasks – reports, cleanups, fundraisers – where is the relational power of a risen community?

The paper that you see wrapped around the entry columns is there so that you can record, “what my mother told me,” as we prepare for the liturgy next week. I wrote down the twenty-third psalm because my mother took me to Sunday school and it is one of the first things I ever memorized. My father was a Sunday morning golfer so I am sure that without my mother I would not have the foundations of faith that are in me now. What did you hear? What do you say? How can we listen?

I am grateful that we are together today in relationship with God and each other. I am grateful for the folks whose lives are a part of mine, for the ways in which we lay down our lives for each other. May it all be done in Love's name. Amen+

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