

*What Joseph Said*  
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Matthew 1:18-25  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ December 18, 2022

This is my question: What did Joseph say? Did Joseph say anything?

We know what Mary said. Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary said, "God has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts." Mary said, "Let it be with me according to your word." Mary said words that were like God's holy light taking on perfect form in human speech. Mary gave birth to the Son of God, and Mary's words gave birth to a myriad of hymns, anthems, poems, sermons, and theological treatises.

My question today is, "What did Joseph say?" As far as we can tell, Joseph may have said nothing at all. In all of the New Testament there is not a single word that is attributed to Joseph.

Joseph is giving us a different gift. Through the absence of his words, Joseph points toward the very, very first step for us in our spiritual journey. We begin by listening. Listening is the first step on this path. Joseph listened. If we are to take a single step on the spiritual path it will be the step of listening. Listening is not easy, and so the spiritual path is not an easy path.

Fourteen years ago, I was taking a seminary course about church administration. One of my fellow students was the leader of a Buddhist Center in Boston. She said to me, "Many of the young people who come to our Buddhist Center have had some experience in your Christian churches. Some of them come to our Buddhist Center because they don't want to do the difficult work required to follow the path of Christianity. Eventually, they discover that at the Buddhist Center they are being asked to do the same kind of difficult spiritual work."

There is no easy first step in the spiritual path. From Joseph, we learn that the first step in our spiritual journey is to listen. So today I have some thoughts for you about listening as a spiritual practice.

You should know that in all of the sermons I have ever preached there is not one single original idea that I can claim as my own. All of the ideas I share with you have come from somewhere else or someone else. Most of the time I just can't remember where I first heard these ideas. I guess that is just one of the hazards of spending one's entire life surrounded by church people and church books and church ideas. Today's sermon is a little different.

For the past month, I have been reading two books that are especially concerned with listening as a spiritual practice. The first is *The Rule of Benedict*. Benedict lived 1500 years ago, during a time of great turmoil and change. Benedict observed that many people wanted to follow a spiritual path, but that people have a tendency to jump onto the latest spiritual fad. As soon as things get difficult, they try something different. 1500 years ago, Benedict observed that people were looking desperately for a quick fix, in a way reminiscent of the flocks of people who came to my friend's Buddhist Center in Boston.

So Benedict created a guidebook for the spiritual journey, called *The Rule of Benedict*. Benedict had much to say about listening as the foundation of the spiritual life. Benedict urges us to "Listen with the ear of the heart."

The second book I have been reading is called "Wisdom Distilled from the Daily". It was written by Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun. My favorite story about Joan Chittister is that she was officially forbidden by the Roman Catholic church from attending a worldwide conference on women's ordination. Upon hearing this news, Joan made her plane reservation to Dublin, Ireland, attended the conference, and delivered the opening address to 350 women from 27 countries. Joan Chittister is a gifted interpreter of the practices of *The Rule of Benedict* for new generations of Christians. Most of the ideas I have to share with you are expressed in these two books.

If we are to follow Joseph's example, we will define ourselves, as people who are actively engaged in the act of listening. Although there will be many times in daily life when we are not, and cannot be actively engaged in listening, if, on the whole, we refuse to listen to God's people and to God's wisdom, we will not be following the way of Christ.

Everyone listens to someone or something. So the first question is, "What are we listening to?" It does not help when people spend most of their time listening to themselves. It does not help for people to listen only to those people who agree with them. It does not help when people listen to authorities who provoke them to

respond to the fear or anger they feel. It helps us to listen to voices of wisdom. So we begin by considering what we are listening to.

Listening is a long-term commitment. Listening happens, bit by bit, not all at once, not at the time that we choose, not at the best time for us. Listening is a relationship we create with someone or something else. You know you have a true friend when you know your friend is listening to you and when you want to listen to the words your friend is saying.

Listening is the first step in a spirituality of awareness. Listening is the first step in becoming aware of the presence of God in every person, in every conversation, in every place.

Listening as a spiritual practice is about intentionality and regularity, not maximalism. We should intentionally seek out wise people to be listening to and to listen to us. Those wise people might be quite close at hand, like your best friend or your spouse. We should be regularly listening to scripture. If we are defined as people who listen we will approach these wise conversation partners with humility and respect. In the case of scripture, this means understanding that there is a truth in scripture that is greater and deeper than our truth. That truth is often not directly accessible to us, so we listen to scripture regularly and repeatedly. Over time, after many hearings, we may come to hear the truth that is greater than our truth.

Most of the time, most of our listening to scripture should happen in the context of our communities. That's because listening is something that is done in community. Listening is an intentional step away from individualism. Listening is an activity that builds community, not self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is part of the false religion of America, so you may be surprised when I say that our first step on the spiritual path is a step away from self-sufficiency and toward listening to others in our communities. When you read scripture on your own, it's helpful to have a wise conversation partner, in the form of a guidebook from someone who has spent many years studying scripture.

Joan Chittister reminds us that the spiritual path is not one where we "make God some kind of private getaway from life." Christianity is the path wherein individuals are actively engaged in listening to where God is at work in their communities. For us, active engagement in our communities is not a little side branch, not an optional part of the spiritual life. To follow Christ is to listen to the needs and voices of our communities. According to Benedict, Christians must be engaged in communities of learning, communities of creativity, and communities of action. Listening is the foundation for all of this engagement.

We can identify whether or not we are listening by our responsiveness and generosity. Those who have listened and heard the cries of the poor do not hoard their wealth. Those who listen to the needs of the world experience a conversation of their hearts and minds and actions.

Fairly often, I notice several behaviors, that alert me to the fact that I am not actually listening. I am not listening when I interrupt someone as they are speaking. I am not listening when I act on my impulses. I am not listening when I think I've had a great inspiration and don't bring it to wise people and listen to their response.

To listen is to be regular. To listen is to show up and participate, in our families, in our work, in prayer, even when it is not the best day for us.

That was the case for Joseph. It wasn't the best year for him. It wasn't the best day for him the day he learned that Mary was pregnant, even though they were months away from their wedding day. Joseph understood, it wasn't really about whether or not he was having a good day.

Listening is not about blind obedience. Listening is about conversion of our lives. We are listening when we are willing to be changed by what we hear. People mistakenly think Joseph's story is a story of blind obedience. That is not true. Joseph's example is an example of conversion of life. Joseph listened and he was changed.

So I encourage you to examine the first step in our spiritual path in your own life. I encourage you to seek out wise conversation partners. I trust that intentional listening will lead to greater engagement. I trust that your listening will lead to greater awareness of the ways God is at work in our community. I trust that your listening will lead to continuing conversion of your life.