
Holy Listening

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

I spent last Saturday on a special retreat. It was not what one might call a monastic retreat. It was not a silent retreat. It was not even a teaching retreat, where I listened to some particular wise teacher.

In fact, it was the annual retreat of our Cathedral Chapter, those eighteen people elected to oversee and steward the ministry of the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip. We take a retreat every year on the second weekend of January, whether there is snow or not. And, wow, was there snow up at Brasstown Valley Conference Center! We were quite safe, but I am sorry that Atlanta and our children did not get much Saturday snow.

A primary feature of our retreat this year was almost a full day of telling our stories. Each of us, speaking to the whole group, gave our “spiritual autobiography.” The title was not meant to be intimidating or threatening. A “spiritual autobiography” is simply a telling of the story of one’s life, with special attention paid to particular spiritual communities or churches, to spiritual turning points, and to spiritual moments and hopes.

The telling of those stories took some energy, and the telling required some tender courage in several instances. They were holy stories, and I thank each person who shared them. However, what also took enormous energy was listening! It takes real energy to listen intentionally to another’s story. This year, I was tremendously impressed with the ability of this year’s Cathedral Chapter to listen. Thank you!

According to Matthew’s gospel, a voice came from heaven just after Jesus had been baptized by John, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved” (Matthew 3:17). That same voice would be heard again, in the middle of his ministry, when Jesus was transfigured on mountain, “This is my Son, the Beloved... Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5).

Listen to him! This past weekend, it struck me, as I was listening to the stories of my friends and colleagues, that I was listening to holy stories. The more I paid attention to those stories, the more those stories became holy and life-giving and spiritual. In fact, the voices of those story-tellers became something like the voice of God.

Listen to her! Listen to him! When we devote ourselves to the holy and hard work of listening, it is God who actually begins to speak to us. But listening is hard work. It is hard to listen so attentively that we no longer worry about what we might say next, or how we are supposed to respond, or even how we might offer helpful advice. Holy listening is simply letting God speak deeply through that other person. Holy listening is paying attention.

This is my beloved son! This is my beloved daughter! Listen to her! Listen to him! Whether you are on retreat or not, whether you are homebound on an ice day or not, whether you are with friend or stranger, that person next to you becomes the voice of God if you pay enough attention. That person is the Beloved son or daughter of God. Listen! Listen to that person, and that moment will become holy indeed.



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