

Story Listening  
—Week 5, Day 1—

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.  
James 1:19

Everybody's got a story. Given a safe place and devoted listener, most people want to share theirs.

If you're on the listening end, you're sending a clear message. The teller matters. They are worth your time. Their story is dear and precious. Listening offers them respect, honor, and celebration.

In his book *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard*, David W. Augsburger says "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."

Good listening is not about fixing, correcting, or converting. Its only agenda is to invite someone to share part of their life with you.

What about you? Are you ready to listen to someone who doesn't believe like you do, vote like you do, value what you value?

Effective listening is as ego-free as possible. You have nothing to prove. You are not better or worse than them. And you don't have to listen professionally, just authentically.

Few activities in life will get us out of our selfish head-space like listening to someone's story. This is not the reason we listen, just a healthy side effect.

Listening also helps us to settle into our place in the grand scheme of things. It breaks down walls and levels the playing field. It

strengthens the empathy muscles in our heart as it loves the person in front of us.

*To listen is to love.*

Something to consider:

*Talk about a time when someone truly heard you.*

(wcvv)

## Don't Be Afraid of Difference

—Week 5, Day 2—

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 1 John 4:18

I have been wrong SO MANY TIMES in my initial perceptions of people. I remember swearing off my judgmental habits in high school when I discovered the back story of my government teacher (whom I didn't particularly care for) whose daughter was a victim of a violent crime.

Everyone has a story.

Despite my desire to have a generous heart, I sometimes become confident again that I can discern who deserves my judgment (hint: no one) and which people deserve the benefit of the doubt (spoiler alert: everyone). When I fall back into my old judge-y habits, I hear again the call to be humble and open and remember that I am not God and do not have a God's-eye view.

In 2007 I spent several months living in South Africa and interviewing people whose life experiences were profoundly different than my own. Being in a different culture and learning to listen to its people was uncomfortable at times. I did not always like what they said, and I certainly could not agree with all of their theological, cultural, or ethical claims. My assumptions and perceptions were regularly shown to be incorrect, but I faithfully listened to what was said with words and left unsaid.

I knew the people I met were beloved of God and that I was called to listen and to bear witness to their struggles, their triumphs, and their pain. I was changed and made better by these relationships. At the height of my discomfort with being such an obvious outsider

and having so much to learn, I would whisper to myself "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid."

When we judge people as different or scary or make assumptions about them, we feed our fear, and we rely on our own finite human abilities. Dr. Loretta Dye talks in our Day 5 video about how we are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action. When we get curious and give people the benefit of the doubt, we find the ways our humanity can connect us and the love of God can bind us together.

Something to think about:

*What kind of person do you find most "foreign"? Write about what you might have in common with this person who differs from you.*

*(kab)*

“It’s Complicated”

—Week 5, Day 3—

Let us not love in words or speech, but in action and truth.

1 John 3:18

Nothing happens in a vacuum. To understand any situation we have to understand the events and circumstances that made it possible. It's a helpful reminder for interpersonal relationships, and it sheds incredible light on societal problems. Take, for example, homelessness. One narrative about homelessness says that “homeless people are lazy; they should get a job and pay their rent.”

But homelessness is much more complicated. People find themselves homeless for a variety of reasons. In Bowling Green, the primary causes of homelessness are relationship changes (divorce/breakup), job loss, chronic illness, untreated illness (behavioral or physical), addiction, and domestic violence. According to Rhondell Miller of HOTEL INC, the latest Housing Analysis of the City of Bowling Green showed an immediate need for more than 15,000 housing units with a rental cost under \$700 a month, and a growing need for units for seniors 65 years old and older. The waiting list varies from 3-6 months to 3-5 years.

At a basic level, we have a nation-wide shortage of affordable housing occurring simultaneously with a rise in poverty. A full-time employee would have to earn \$15.02 an hour to afford a 2-bedroom rental in Bowling Green/Warren County, KY and meet their basic needs, but the average renter makes under \$13 per hour.

These few paragraphs barely scratch the surface of our most vulnerable citizens’ great need not just for affordable housing but also for health care, higher wages, mental health care, substance abuse treatment programs, and domestic violence intervention.

If we look at societal problems and see easy solutions, we should probably look more closely so that we can better see the conditions that create these situations. Only when we recognize the complexity and intentionally listen to the people who are most affected by the problem can various collaborators begin to work toward long-term societal change.

Societal problems are complicated—and so are people. We rarely get to see more than what social media and brief encounters allow. But individuals are—in Wolfe’s words—the sum of the moments of their lives, which invariably includes heartache, trauma, and pain. In yesterday’s reading, I confessed my struggle to stay generous and to avoid judging others. Today’s reflection reminds me of the same—that there’s more than meets the eye to both people and to societal problems.

Something to think about:

*What is a situation that you once thought was clear cut but then—as you learned more—became more complicated?*

*(kab)*

## The Life You Heal May Be Your Own

—Week 5, Day 4—

Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:7

We started our homeschooling year in July, mainly because it was so hot out and there was nothing else to do. An epic struggle for control soon emerged on the battleground of 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Math. I faced a real problem: every lesson dissolved into conflict, and my strategies (the video series, scaled back expectations, and fun math games) were failing me.

Then a friend offered her high school daughter's tutoring services. My boy began to glow during math time. I could hear her telling him what a good job he was doing, and I could see that he was believing it. I could also see his tutor's confidence grow. I suspected that she could see in him the same kind of analytical mind that both empowered and isolated her. The very same logical reasoning that would connect them to each other could alienate them from some peers, especially in a pandemic. I quickly realized the value was not just in the math but in the connection they were forging and the healing that could come through their realization that they were not alone in their isolation.

Not to be left out, my daughter declared her desire for tutoring, and so weekly art classes commenced. To say my daughter was excited is an understatement. She squeaks with anticipation as she waits for the call to go through each week. She and her new bestie read a story and create beautiful art projects, and their connection provides a respite from this world of COVID, virtual academies, and social distancing. They are a bright spot in each other's week, and

the encouragement, affirmation, and creativity that bubble out of this first grader and her sixth-grade friend feeds their souls.

In relationships where there is wholehearted love and vulnerability, we find safety and a place to heal and flourish.

Something to think about:

*Write about relationships that have helped to heal you.*

*(kab)*

## A Journey from Head to Heart

Dr. Loretia Dye

—Week 5, Day 5—

People will know you are disciples of Jesus by your love for one another.

John 13:35

This workshop [[Link](#)] by Dr. Dye took place in August 2020 as part of a longer webinar (also available on our website). Dr. Dye is an Associate Professor in the Department of School Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. She is a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC), National Board Certified Counselor (NBCC), and Licensed School Counselor (SCL).

Dr. Dye's presentation explains how our brains try to keep us safe by scanning for threats and making meaning of information using processes of sorting, creating associations, and filling in the gaps. The positive associations or stereotypes we call "preferences" and our negative stereotypes are "prejudices." When we discover that stereotypes and prejudices are affecting how we view people, we need to intentionally retrain our brains. Dr. Dye emphasizes that we "are not responsible for [our] first thought, but [we] are responsible for [our] second thought and [our] first action."

To watch the full webinar—including an introduction and devotional by Pastor Adam Shourds and a presentation by Dr. Terry Daniels, please click [here](#).

After you've watched the 15-minute video, take some time to reflect on the following prompts:

- Did you have any expectations of this video given the topic?
- How did you feel when you saw the images that reversed the biases we hold?
- What was your experience of the presentation, and where is God nudging you to examine those first thoughts before your second thoughts and first actions?

*(kab)*