

Proper 17B

Sept. 2, 2018, St. Stephen's, Richmond

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It is a Thursday afternoon at 2:00, the time St. Stephen's jail chaplains gather at the city jail to be escorted upstairs to spend time with the jail residents. On the "pods", as the wings are called in the jail, we do Bible study, pray, and share Communion. We always go with a plan for the Bible study. Sometimes we are able to use it. Not this week.

It had been a very bad night and morning for the women in the jail. All who came into the little classroom where we meet were badly shaken, some almost in tears. Neither I nor my co-chaplain for the day knew what had happened, and we aren't allowed to ask. As is our pattern, we prayed. We read the Scripture we were using, and then sat silently. The Scripture we were pondering was the story about Jesus with his disciple in a boat while a storm arose and threatened them. Jesus slept in the stern as the storm raged. The disciples were understandably frightened and awaken Jesus who then calmed the storm.

As the silence continued one of the women started to speak. She reflected on how the Scripture passage spoke to her in the context of the latest trauma in

the jail. She said, "We're all in that boat. We're living in that boat. And we can go down with the boat in the storm, or we can wake up Jesus. Cuz he's in this boat with us." Then a woman across the circle began to sob. The first woman, older than the others, reached out to her and said, "You're not alone. Jesus is here for you, right here next to you; just call his name. Wake him up! And I'm here for you, too. ALWAYS. You're not alone. EVER. If ever you need a reminder, you come get me. And oh, just read your Bible, and you'll know how Jesus is with you."

The tearful woman shared her story. We listened in silence. No one spoke. Slowly, the older woman started retelling the Good News: Jesus is with us. Jesus cares for us. She was quick to listen and slow to speak. The tearful woman's anger began to abate. What was clear to me was that the older woman wasn't just quoting Scripture but was living it. It was her incarnation of love not her words that touched her sister inmate.

Now that older woman has read her Bible. She knows the Letter of James: Listening, speaking, generous acts of love. She knows it, and she lives it. She's a good model showing us what our lives are to be, how we are to live as we follow Jesus. It's not a question of circumstances; it's who we are. It's how God formed

us. These women, time and again, show me that it is in listening, being deeply attentive to the moment that we are aware of God presence. And it is in speaking slowly that we have time to speak with love. Only then do we give generously of ourselves. It was so clear that afternoon how love takes on flesh and is real. Sit quietly and listen. Don't speak too quickly. Give generously of yourself so that love is shared.

If these ways of being are truly of God, why is it so hard to practice them?

I can only speak for myself. Being quiet and truly listening to another is sometimes hard for me to do, and some days, it seems as though it is getting harder. There is so much noise in my life. Horns honk, the dishwasher beeps, as does the washing machine and the microwave. That's in addition to email, my phone and other devices. All that noise is *outside* of me and around me. And sometimes, it truly gets in my way of being present.

Sometimes, for me, it seems that there is an even the more distracting noise. It is the internal dialogue that prattles in my head. That's the noise that keeps me from being quick to listen to another. Maybe that's true for you, too. How many times does a husband or wife or child come home after a long day wanting to be tended and honored? Listened to? Loved on? We want to be

attentive to the people we cherish but the noisy unsettledness of our own day distracts us. Even as we struggle to silence it, we find we're not fully present. Maybe we're still on the conference call that we finished an hour ago, or in the midst of an argument that we had with a friend earlier in the day. So we don't listen to the ones we love.

The noise, external and internal, that keeps us from being quick to listen isn't the only thing that gets in our way from generous acts of love, of being truly present for each other. We are too often quick to speak, rather than slow. We don't take time—even 5 seconds—just to take a breath. We rush to voice an opinion, or “make it all better” or speak from our own woundedness. So our words can tumble out with little awareness of the effect they may have.

We don't mean for them to be hurtful or dismissive, we just speak too quickly. And text messages, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram all reinforce our rapid response. We blurt out something either on our devices or with our mouths, and then regret our haste. I wonder if our jumping in too quickly is not about what is going on **outside** of us in our busy and demanding world but rather is our little self, our ego, demanding attention and wanting it instantly. Our words become more about **US** than the person we're talking with. So we speak too quickly rather

than wait with our response or recognize that it is our *own* need that we are tending. I suspect that when that happens, it makes generous acts of love, like the one I witnessed in the jail, pretty hard.

Somehow those women in the city jail have figured out how to be quiet in the midst of the unrelenting din of their lives, how to put aside their own troubles, and give of themselves to one another. I suspect it is their generosity of spirit; it's their deep caring for one another that saves them from the harshness of jail.

I believe that no matter who we are or where we find ourselves, all of us need places and people who are quick to listen, slow to speak, and generous in loving.

As I reflect on my life and look for places where people are quick to listen, slow to speak, and generous in love, one place that immediately comes to mind is my Emmaus group. This is a place where we are quick to listen to each other, slow to speak, and generous in loving each other. It is the place where my soul is gently tended. I suspect that that's what James was encouraging us to find- a sacred community where we know we are loved. Maybe it's the city jail. Maybe it's

within our family, or here at St. Stephen's, or with a group of gentle friends.

Wherever we find it, our souls are tended and we know we are loved.