

## Kevin's Korner

As I write this week, I've been reminded that October 1<sup>st</sup> will be the 4 year anniversary of Shannon and my first Sunday at First Christian Church, which means that Sunday, September 28th is the 4th anniversary of our arrival in Grand Junction – and our wedding anniversary. It was a busy time! Reflecting on that time in our lives, I'm reminded of the wonderful welcome we received from you dear folks, beginning months before when the Search Committee invited us to visit and when we fell in love with all of you. It was a wonderful time, "God's time," as I'll talk about in my sermon Sunday, time where God is clearly moving and working in our lives.

I remember in our visit and several times since, where have shared my "idealized" vision for this church and for the world-wide church: It seems that so many churches are willing and able to welcome anybody and everybody into their fellowship, as long as everyone takes off, at the door, anything (hat) that might cause disagreement of any kind. My dream and expectation for every church is that everybody is welcome to enter and participate "just like they are." That means welcoming everyone to enter and participate with their bias, prejudices, insecurities, deficiencies, naivety, even hatreds. Remember that Jesus asked (commanded?) that we love our enemies as well as our friends.

Can you just imagine two outspoken political rivals entering the sanctuary together, conversing about some divisive subject, scowling even; and then sitting together in worship with their divisive hats, stickers, t-shirts, whatever; and then bowing their heads to pray together, to sing together, to listen to the preacher talk about things they disagree with or agree; walking up to the communion table and taking turns receiving the bread and the cup; walking back to their seats to continue in prayer and meditation, seeking God's direction; and then, walking out of the sanctuary, picking up their heated conversation, before shaking hands and wishing each other well for the week, or even in the upcoming election or debate.

Can you imagine? I can. Do I expect it this Sunday? Maybe not. But why not? If there is any place in the world where the divided might come together for a common purpose or activity, the church ought to be that place. Because we ought to be worshiping the same loving, accepting, forgiving, and redeeming God.

This vision does presuppose that we are all worshiping the same God above anything else; like money, self, nation, race, power, partisanship, greed, jealousy, victimhood, superiority, or a million other things that us humans prioritize and worship over God on any given day.

Now, if you can imagine with me, how might we make such a dream become reality? Do we want it to become reality? Are we willing to prioritize this dream over any other agenda, at least while we participate in worshiping and serving God? Are we willing to trust God and trust a stranger enough to risk giving up our own power and self-serving, self-protections? Are we willing to put God's purposes over our own?

If you are with me so far, how do we start this new lifestyle, this kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven, practice? Prayer is surely the first step. Perhaps the second step would be to become better listeners. We can practice that. For most of us, we have room to grow in our listening skills and practice.

A few years back a statistic shared that on average, we listen to other people for seven seconds, before we decide we've already heard this, or we decide that we agree already, or we decide that we disagree. What happens after that seven seconds? Usually, we stop listening. Maybe we start thinking about how we will argue against what was said. Maybe we think of our own examples of why we agree. Maybe drift off to think of something else that we haven't already heard about. Usually, we think about how we will respond when the speaker finally stops talking. The question is, what have we learned from the other person? And how have we shown our respect and interest in what the other person wants to share?

Shannon reminded me of a quote about the importance of listening well. "Remember, God gave us two ears but only one mouth." We should use them accordingly and give our listening twice the importance as we communicate with others.

In a practice called "active listening," one focuses on listening to understand, not listening to either agree or disagree, or pass judgement in any other way. An active listener tries to nurture curiosity within themselves, leading them to ask leading questions, which will encourage the speaker to fill in details, give more history and context to their story or thoughts. An active listener uses eye contact and head nods or words to encourage the speaker to share more of themselves, or their intentions. The beauty of active listening is that it enables us to understand and find common ground, which might lead to a stronger relationship.

We'll be reading from the Gospel of Mark this Fall, both in Bible study and in sermons. You will notice that Jesus often begins conversations with a question, seeking to understand the other person's needs and desires, so he can accept them, love them and help them find healing in body, mind, or spirit. He quite often focuses on people who are not well accepted in society, helping them to heal relationships within the community. Quite likely Jesus' reputation for speaking with authority was related to his listening skills, which enabled him to understand people and situations so he could address their needs.

Unfortunately, we don't have many role models for good listening skills. But do remember how our Regional Minister, Rev. Dale Matherly listened so well to us at our retreat. He is one that I have greatly appreciated for his listening skills. I hope you have people in your life who give you that gift of good listening. It is one of the best ways that we can share the love of Jesus with others, by listening first. Wouldn't it be great if a church congregation could become known for their skills and willingness to be good listeners! Maybe we can practice with each other.

Thank you for taking such good care of Shannon and myself these past four years. Much of that care has been good listening. I hope we can return that gift. In fact, I hope that all of us can give that gift to each other and also to our neighbors in the community. Let us listen with Jesus' ears and heart! God bless you!

*Pastor Kevin*