

To many, Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians; particularly this 13th chapter; is known as the love chapter; the reading we often hear at weddings. In his letter, Paul reminds us, "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I understood like a child. But when I became an adult, I put away those childish ways". It's almost as if Paul is saying there is an understanding of love which is different for kids and grown-ups. We remember how sweet, innocent, and loving children are. We learn from their love as they wrap their arms around our legs. And then we remember a child's favorite word is "Mine!" Try taking away a favourite toy and you know what I mean. As we mature into adulthood, we develop a more subtle way of expressing ourselves. Paul reminds us of the truth of our lives together, how often we fall in love with somebody because of their beauty, intelligence, and charm. Fast forward a few weeks or months and we suddenly realize how much they would benefit from our wisdom and experience about who they ought to become. So much for the honeymoon! All too often this thing called love needs a little growing up itself. And the grown-up Christian recognizes that marriages and friendships, relationships and church communities bring together varieties of people with different gifts and different ideas. Listen to what Paul is really saying, and more than anything else he says that true love is in understanding. The beginning of understanding is listening; not with just our ears; but with our hearts and souls. We listen in a way that hears deeply; not only to what is being said; but also to what is left unsaid.

Here's an example. There was a young group in Sunday school, who did an awful lot of talking. Fortunately, they had a patient and understanding Sunday school teacher who did an awful lot of listening. One Sunday morning, they were reading from a red-letter edition of the Bible; the red letters were words spoken by Jesus. One child asked 'why is it that Jesus is so important, when there aren't very many red letters in this Bible?' After what seemed like an extraordinarily long pause, the teacher answered, "Well, I guess it's probably because Jesus listened an awful lot more than he talked". Real understanding comes from real listening. And real listening; mature listening; isn't jumping at the chance to speak. Mature listening takes courage, because we might just hear something that will change our thinking; maybe even our very selves. Again, the beginning of understanding is listening with not just our ears; but with our hearts and souls. We listen in a way that hears deeply; not only to what is being said; but also to what is left unsaid.

Lonni Collins Pratt is an award-winning author and journalist; co-author of a book called "Radical Hospitality". Lonni talks about the time that she and her husband lived across the road from a small log cabin. The cabin was empty most of the time, but then a man moved in to start fixing up the place. Lonni was an introvert, while her husband was quick to go over, introduce himself, and talk with the man who had just moved in. Lonni's husband came back and said, "You really ought to get to know this guy. He's fascinating. He's fixing up the place. It's going to be wonderful". A few weeks passed and then, in the middle of the night, when everyone was sleeping, Lonni heard a scream; a blood-curdling scream of an adult that came from across the road. She knew it was coming from that cabin. She bolted upright in her bed because it was the kind of scream that wakes you up in the middle of the night and makes you want to hide under the covers. She went to the window, and she listened until that scream began to fade. Lonni got back into bed, but she couldn't get back to sleep. The next night the same thing happened;

another blood-curdling scream coming from the cabin across the road. The next day, Lonni made some chili. And being an introvert, she had to muster the courage to take a big bowl of the chili and a thermos of coffee, and a couple slices of pie, and go across the road. She knocked on the door, and Les; the man who lived there; opened the door. Les, she said, looks a little bit like Willie Nelson. And he was very gracious and let her in, and they sat down, and they ate the chili and the pie. And as they were finishing up the thermos of coffee, Les talked about his life, and how he liked to fix up little houses in such a way that eventually some young family would come in and take it over and improve the neighborhood. Les said he never stayed in one place very long. He had moved many times in his life, and didn't have a lot of family and friends, but that was all right. He got to know people as he moved around. And then he said the one thing that changed everything for Lonni. Les had served in Vietnam; a place he said was hard to get out of his head. In fact, most of the time he feels like he's still living there. And because Lonni was listening deeply, she heard the things that Les said though he never really used the words. What Lonni heard Les say was 'I hope you'll tolerate this season of screaming from a man who will eventually move on. Share this season of suffering with me, and then one day, a nice young family will come in across the road from you and it will be a much better place. But, for now, I appreciate that you would be willing to share a meal with a man in the morning after you've probably heard him scream at night'. Lonni says when you really listen to someone scream against the darkness, you're never the same again.

It's true, isn't it? A grown-up love listens deeply. It listens to the words that are being said, and it listens deeply to what the heart and soul are also saying even though sometimes the heart and soul can't put the words together. Listening in this sort of way, is the beginning of understanding. And the beginning of understanding is often the beginning of a love like that described by Paul in the passage today.

Have you ever heard someone say, "You might be hearing me, but you're not listening to me"? Do you know the difference between selective hearing and selective listening? I know we would all have a best guess, but I looked it up just to be sure. Selective hearing refers to focusing on specific sounds or voices while *turning down the volume* on others. I like to listen to music and have had to do this. When I really want to hear the piano, I can turn down the volume on the trumpets and violins. I still hear them, but I'm focusing on the piano. When I want to hear what one specific person is saying in a noisy crowd, I will look at that one person and I can single out their voice (maybe it's actually watching their lips move and facial queues as they speak). I'm not ignoring the others. They're still there. I'm just focusing on that one specific sound or voice. That's selective hearing. Selective listening refers to the conscious or unconscious choosing to listen to what is relevant to you while *tuning-out* what isn't. Merriam-Webster defines listening as "to hear something with thoughtful attention". Hearing without listening is an example of the oft heard phrase "in one ear and out the other". So, selective hearing is *turning down the volume* of the other, and selective listening is *tuning-out* the other. I think a couple of questions we can ask are, 'Am I an active or passive listener? Do I listen exclusively to the person who is speaking?'

You know, listening can be beautiful and frightening at the same time. Listening can open us up to a world of wonder and amazement, and it can also be life changing in unexpected ways. So, we have to listen for verbal queues; a sigh, a long pause, things said, and things left unsaid or even avoided altogether. We must listen to understand, and this leads us to love. Paul proclaims that love is the greatest. As wonderful as faith and hope are, love is still greater.

Faith without love is incomplete, and hope without love is uninspired. Faith is ignited by the fire of love, and hope becomes certain when it sees the light of love. When we actively listen, when we show understanding, and when we speak and act in love; people can see the love of God flowing in and through us.

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, but when I became an adult, I put away those childish ways”. Hardly any passage in scripture demands such self-examination as Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians. When we focus ourselves on what God wants for us, it will result in personal and spiritual growth. With God’s help, we can wake up fresh and renewed every morning; feeling good about ourselves, feeling happy about the day ahead, and living more fulfilled lives for God, others, and ourselves. To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Blessings on your day, and I look forward to seeing you soon.

Robert