

Rev Sally's Sermon February 7, 2021

Back in the early 1990's at the start of the first Gulf War, when I watched the evening news, I often saw a reporter in the Middle East. Sometimes that reporter was a woman. If it were, that woman would be wearing a scarf over her head. This was to satisfy an Islamist tradition that a woman should have her head covered. When I first started seeing this, I must admit this custom irritated me. I considered myself a feminist. And I didn't want anything or anyone to stop a woman from living the life she wanted to live.

At that time, the idea of a woman being compelled to wear a scarf over her head, seemed to be a restriction. But over the years, I've had the opportunity to listen to others. I've listened to Muslim men and women, especially to woman who see the scarf as something that they voluntarily take on as a sign of their faith. In 1993, I went to the Holy Land with my seminary classmates. Several of my friends were looking forward to getting a Kafia in the ancient city of Jerusalem. A Kafia is the head scarf worn by men. You may have seen men wearing them on TV – they are usually red and white, in a checkered pattern. Because of this interest, I also considered getting one. But when I went into a shop and asked, I was told that women didn't wear the red and white one. Those were for men. Instead, women wore the solid white scarf so that's what I got. I listened and then out of respect for my hosts, I followed their custom.

Listening to others. It's so important for understanding. Listening is different from simply hearing. When we listen, we put aside our own agenda. We try to view life from the other person's perspective. This is what Paul was talking about in today's reading from First Corinthians. Paul believed that in Christ, he was completely free from cultural and religious restrictions himself. But in order to serve others, he was willing to limit his freedom. He was willing to live the way the other person lived. "To the Jew, I became a Jew, to those under the law, I became as one under the law, to those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, to the weak, I became weak.... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all, for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." Paul chose to meet people where they were, without projecting on them his expectations. He wanted to know their concerns, their hopes, their fears. When Paul was with a Jew, who respected the Jewish dietary laws, he also showed respect for the law. But when he was with Roman citizens – Gentiles – who had no understanding of Jewish dietary

law, he respected this position also. Paul put himself in the shoes of the other. He listened to others.

Right now, there's a lot of division in the world. Everyone has a position, and many want to shout their opinions at others, but few are willing to listen to others. But if we listen to each other, we will learn about each other. When we do, we will put ourselves in the other person's shoes and receive a new perspective on life. When we truly listen, we hear and consider the other person's thoughts, position, and reasoning. We accept and respect the other person's feelings. It doesn't mean that these thoughts and feelings are ours. It doesn't even mean that we will all agree. It simply means that we have understood the other person. And by doing so, we have offered them dignity and respect, the dignity and respect that our Baptismal covenant calls us to give to all people.

But truly listening is difficult. It requires that we set aside our own position just long enough to hear what the other person is saying. I've noticed that sometimes when I argue with someone else, as they're making their points in the argument, instead of listening to them, I'm already planning my rebuttal. This is actually a quite common response. But the problem is that when we respond this way, we never truly hear what the other person is saying. As you listen, you can tell how effective your listening is, if you can restate what the other person has said. For example, to create a fictional conflict, let's say someone tells me that they're mad at me because I didn't return their phone call. I can begin by listening to what the person tells me. Then after I've listened to them, I might repeat what I've heard them say. "I hear you saying that you're angry because I did not return your phone call and that made you feel ignored." Then the person might affirm that is indeed what they thought and felt. By summarizing what I've heard, I've affirmed that they have indeed been heard, potentially deescalating the stress between us. Then I can ask them to listen to me. I might say, "I'm sorry you felt ignored. That was certainly not my intention because I never received your message."

When we listen to another, it requires that we put the other person first. This isn't easy. But Paul was able to do this because he trusted, not in himself and his abilities but in God. When we also trust in God, then we can also reach out to others, putting aside our own concerns, being open to others, listening to what they have to say. When we do, the world will be drawn closer together and the good news of God's love can be shared.