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Hearing

Beyond

the

Words

*How to Become
a Listening Pastor*

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The encouragement of my friends in the writing of this book has been invaluable. They witnessed the birthing of this book and stood by, listening to me through the experience. I thank especially Jacqueline Grossmann and Jeanette Repp, who enthusiastically and tirelessly read and reread portions of this manuscript even in its most ragged forms. Thanks to the people and ministers of the two churches that welcome and receive me into their families: Saint John African Methodist Episcopal Church of Aurora, Illinois, especially Pastor Jesse D. Hawkins and my beloved colleagues in ministry there, and Bethany Baptist Church of Christ in Evanston, especially Pastor Brenda J. Little.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem with listening is that it is *so easy not to do*. None of us, myself included, listen as consistently well as we might. Listening is very hard work. Listening affects all aspects of our everyday lives from the smallest one-to-one relationships to family, group, committee, congregational, and workplace relationships, as well as community, governments, and even international relationships. Listening plays a vital role in ministry in all of its forms: caregiving, education, chaplaincy, mission, administration, evangelism, and preaching. Effective ministry requires us to be able to listen well. We can't avoid the need to be able to listen *care-fully* in order to relate effectively.

"Communication" surrounds us and intrudes on our lives. People speak loudly into their cell phones in public places. Technology makes it possible for us to be in communication with people anywhere, at any time. We are deluged with communication around the clock. People "talk over" one another, even on public television. This amount of "communication" and the number of so-called talk shows would lead one to think that a lot of listening is going on. Not necessarily. Quality listening is not taking place. Outward signs do not ensure inward realities. In spite of all this connection with one another, what we are missing is *feeling connected*. We have adapted to the babble by blocking out a lot of the interference with which we are constantly bombarded. Even cutting down on this interference does not mean that we will be able to listen more deeply in today's world. It is a paradox that we are surrounded by continuous communication and yet feel disconnected, isolated, and alienated.

The cell phone commercials that feature the man who travels into every kind of setting asking, "Can you hear me now?" symbolizes for me the state of communications among those longing to be heard and the constant search for someone who will "hear me now."

We long to be connected with one another. Part of this deep longing is to be listened to, to be received by another person and *feel connected* in a way that is not superficial or minimal. Whenever I have deeply heard someone's pain or struggle and have been able to reflect that hearing back to the person effectively, the response of the person who is heard is often deep relief. When I have experienced someone deeply listening to me, I have known that response of relief and found a feeling of connection. When we are heard, we experience being "seen."

Longing for the connections, and the belonging that listening offers to us, draws us to community. Communities of faith in particular, ideally, are places where we are received and feel connected; where we are nurtured and we take the risks of growing. Being welcomed, received, and heard builds the realities of community. Within community—as part of community—people learn to speak and learn to listen. Listening is not acquired without community. Community is not created without listening.

Across cultures we cannot hear one another without struggling with the cultural differences within and surrounding what is said. Males and females have difficulty hearing one another across acquired and reinforced gender barriers.¹

Children and their parents have great difficulties in listening to one another across generations. It is also true that pastors and parishioners do not hear one another much of the time. Nonlistening happens even in situations in which listening is *the thing that is intended*, such as in pastoral care and counseling, and for parishioners, in listening to sermons.

Assumptions we make, expectations we have, and stereotypes we hold about others and their circumstances affect how well we listen to them. Past experiences of listening and current issues with which we struggle are factors that influence our listening.

True Listening

The focus on listening here is on truly hearing another person, deeply listening. I use different phrases throughout the book to make it clear that I mean a different kind of listening—true hearing, caring listening, effective listening, pastoral listening, and healing listening. I will use such phrases to emphasize that what is being addressed is not simply the act of listening to words to which we are all accustomed. The hearing of

words and the receiving of the speaker are far from being the same thing; most of our listening takes place somewhere in between these two extremes.

Teenagers today have an interesting way of expressing their understanding of what they have heard: "I feel you." The question form, which asks about whether someone has been understood (heard), is, "Do you feel me?" Or in its abbreviated forms, "You feel me?" or even, "Feel me?" These young people seem to have grasped a dimension of listening that may be less consciously available to adults. Hearing does not enter into the feeling realm unless it is truly listening. The teens' way of saying they have heard acknowledges the feeling dimension to the deep listening and authentic understanding that this book encourages.² The feeling content in what is spoken and what we hear may be more important than the words used for speaking.

Listening and Hospitality

Over the years, I have encouraged students to think of listening as an act of receiving—making use of the gesture of an open palm, facing up, extended as if to receive something. The use of this gesture became the impulse for me to explore the connections between hospitality and listening, since the basic movement of hospitality is also receiving.

As I have thought about listening, experienced listening and being heard, and as I have taught the importance of listening, I began to see the power of a connection between listening and hospitality. This connection was enhanced by my discovery of the great value given to hospitality in scripture. Hospitality and listening fit well together, and I believe that listening can be enhanced by some gifts found in understanding hospitality.

Because of the centrality of receiving in listening, listening can be understood as an act of hospitality. Listening, like hospitality, not only involves receiving another person, but includes being welcoming and open to the speaker who is in our presence. Ability to listen is rooted in the *person* or character of the listener, as is hospitality.

Neither listening nor hospitality is lodged solely in *practice*, but each is also a matter of *being*. Listening is not a matter of precise procedure, nor is it entirely a matter of "Whoever has ears let them hear."³ As this saying indicates on the surface, there is a need for ears in order to hear.

However, having ears doesn't always mean we hear.⁴ "Whoever has ears" otherwise may mean "those who welcome me and my words *into* their lives," or "those who recognize the true meaning of what is said and welcome it." Receiving, whether in the practice of hospitality or in listening, does not happen with closed hands, crossed arms, or a clenched heart. Being able to receive another with listening hospitality requires willingness and ability *to be open to the other*—with hands, arms, and hearts open and ready to receive.

A Story of Missing Listening

A woman came to my house weekly over a period of months. This woman never invited me to tell her about myself, or left me any openings in which to do so. I would listen as she struggled to bring the gospel, as she understood it, to me and convince me of the correctness of her faith and the importance of my accepting it. She had no idea who I was or what I already knew about God or already believed. I wanted to see if she would ever ask.

Finally we met under other circumstances and she discovered that I was a seminary professor. She didn't return to our house. I did not remain silent about myself to embarrass her or in any way diminish her faith. I didn't intend to make this experience an experiment. It was only after many visits that it dawned on me that her approach was clearly general and did not include the specifics of my life and me. I have long believed what Carroll Wise said in defining pastoral care, which points toward the particularity of the individual. I realized that I was curious about what this woman brought and was impressed with her diligence and enthusiasm, but I did not feel "touched." What I suspect is that my visitor made assumptions about me and who I was, and from these assumptions she brought her message. This visitor helped me see how very important listening is, before evangelism.

The generalized approach taken by my visitor is much like the approach of the pastor who described a hospital visit, "I offered some words of comfort and then left." Maybe those same "words of comfort" had been offered to every hospitalized parishioner in that pastor's ministry experience. Within failures to listen are assumptions about what people "need," which always are just that—assumptions.

The Heart of Caring Ministries

We identify ourselves as people who "love to tell the story," which was clearly my visitor's approach. It is important to remember that in order to tell the story effectively, we need to know the person to whom we tell the story—to have some sense of where that person is on their faith journey. This cannot be discovered apart from listening. Carroll Wise's definition of pastoral care as communicating the gospel to persons at the point of their need has been a staple in my teaching of pastoral care.⁵ If we are to effectively provide pastoral care, it becomes necessary to first know what a person's point of need happens to be. Otherwise, care becomes a generalized shot in the dark with no target and no consideration of the individual to whom care is being offered.

Pastoral Listening

Pastoral listening takes place in a variety of contexts. First, pastoral listening occurs in the context of all of the functions of ministry, which are located in the contexts of a wide variety of human communities. Pastoral listening takes place in the context of listening to God and of God listening to us.

In every area of ministry careful listening is a key to effective ministry. Preaching may *seem* to be an exception to this claim, but in order to bring the Word of God to the people of God it is necessary to know where the people of God are at this time and in this place. Listening to the people is a prelude to preaching. The preaching pastor who knows the people to whom she or he brings the message of the sermon, knows how to address it to these particular people. The gospel is not generic, but connects with people in particular ways as it relates to their lives. Hearing the people is the way they are known; their struggles, pains, and needs are revealed in listening to them.

Not Being Heard

As we think about listening and strive to improve our listening, it is necessary to give some attention to the experience of *not being heard*. It is important to recognize what other persons experience when we are not

listening to them. When we experience the frustration of feeling we are not being heard, we seldom break the rules of politeness and challenge the one who is merely *seeming* to listen to us. As speakers we are able to recognize nonlistening even when it is not so obviously conveyed as with a glance at a watch, wandering eyes, or even yawns.

We can sense when another is not listening to us. We can experience this even when there are the signals to the contrary, such as sustained eye contact, repeated nods, or verbal affirmations like “uh huh” or “I see.” We go on speaking even when we have a sense that we are not being heard. Perhaps we keep talking with the hope that what we sense and suspect is wrong and that indeed we are being heard. Or we continue to speak with the hope that something will catch the listener's attention.

Awareness of the experience of those who speak to us and are not heard is important for encouraging our efforts to become the best listeners we can be. Remember, if you are able to sense that someone is not listening to you, speakers will be able to sense when you are not listening to them.

Levels of Listening

Even though we all come with different levels of listening abilities, all of us can improve our listening skills. As ministers we want to be able to evaluate our listening—how are we doing as listeners? We also want to be able to tell whether someone to whom we are listening actually experiences being heard. This book is written with the recognition that we do not come with the same degree of listening skills; nor do we, whatever our skill levels, listen with the same degree of focus all of the time. The poorest listener may have brilliant moments when her or his attention is captured and held rapt. The whole message is heard loud and clear, and appropriate response is given.

The best of listeners, however, will have moments of stress or distraction that draw them away from their usual gifts in listening and into moments of, perhaps, more self-preoccupation. Being a consistently effective listener includes moments in which we lapse into poor listening. Being an effective listener includes learning how to recover and return to the person we are failing or have failed to hear, to listen with renewed attention. As we examine our own listening, we do well to have compassion for ourselves as listeners, recognizing our personal and ministry contexts that influence our listening.

Overview

This book is intended for use as a workbook for seminary classes in areas of pastoral care and counseling. But it is not intended only for the audience of the seminary class, since it is designed so that it also can be used by individuals or by any groups in the church interested in improving their listening abilities. It will be helpful not only to pastors, but also to groups within a congregation or parish who want to do their work together more effectively: church boards or committees, for example. The exercises are easily adaptable for a variety of church and personal uses.

Before we get into the first chapter of the book, I offer the reader some exercises intended to prepare readers for being ready to listen. These are found within the Introduction in a section called “Exercises to Get Started.” The first chapter brings us to a discussion of foundations for listening and an understanding of the importance of hospitality in the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. Qualities found in hospitality form the basis for each of the following chapters. Chapter 2 discusses what is necessary in order to prepare to listen effectively. Chapter 3 encourages listening to what is not actually being said, in receiving physical communications that may significantly alter what is heard. Often feelings are not named and yet can be seen as the person speaks. The last two chapters present concerns about the limits of the listening pastor and the gift of listening for God as one listens to others.

We will look at ways to improve listening skills using focus questions and exercises related to each chapter. Following each chapter there are focus questions. These questions encourage further consideration and application of that which was presented in the chapter. The exercises following each chapter (and this introduction) are designed to increase one's awareness of one's listening effectiveness and discover barriers to one's hearing as ways to improve one's listening skills. There is an additional short section at the end of the book that includes more skill-building exercises. Readers also are encouraged to keep a listening journal to use for recording progress and growth in listening discoveries and skills. The journal can provide a place to keep track of self-developed programs designed for diminishing barriers to listening. The journal can also be a place to write prayers that you use for preparing yourself for listening—prayers for yourself, your focus and clarity, and prayers for those you visit. Some people find journal keeping to be burdensome;

others have discovered that tracking oneself can be of value. Try it. You may like it.

Some of the exercises provide a place for feedback from those to whom you listen as a way to further assess your self-perceptions. The exercises offer opportunities to observe the listening of others and intentionally focus on how it feels to be "half listened to." The chapters and exercises take readers through stages toward more effective listening, with the recognition that growth in effective listening is a lifelong process that continues to be a challenge.

Introductory Exercise: Noticing When You Are Heard

Intuitively, you know when you are not being heard. Those with preaching experience can observe the congregation even while preaching a sermon and notice those who at least appear attentive. (They may not realize that you can notice.) What is it in their demeanor that tells you they hear the meaning of what you are saying? Nods of heads, smiles, an attitude of attentiveness, looking at you with apparent focus? In the African American church there are signs that are verbalized in amens, in encouraging exclamations such as "Preach!" or in physical signs of hands raised in agreement, or persons standing up. These are signs that tell us that we are being heard as we speak. Culture makes a difference in the ways people show attentiveness. Eye contact, for example, is considered rude rather than attentive in some cultures.

We also detect signs of nonlistening in bored expressions and apparent nonattentiveness—looking elsewhere, sleeping, reading, appearing obviously distracted.⁶ We have ways of knowing when others do not listen to us. Being in the position of speaking to a group of people is only illustrative. These comments apply in one-to-one conversations as well. Often we do not tune in to this information because we do not want it to be distracting. More important, we do not want to be hurt. We do not want to admit to ourselves that the other(s) are not listening.

The Exercise

Spend a designated period of time—a few days, a week (not just a few hours)—that will span a variety of contacts with other persons. Set your

time boundaries. Observe how others listen to you. Be especially aware of those times when others convey that they *are not* listening. At those points focus on *what it is that tells you the person is not listening*. Is it glazed-over eyes or a fixed facial expression? Is it smiling when you speak of a tragedy? Something in their manner tells you that he or she "checked out." Identify what it is that tells you the person is not listening, even if you feel you are just guessing.

The Written Assignment

Keep a list of descriptions of what signaled you that another person was not hearing you. Be aware that family members may be the best subjects for this exercise. For your own benefit you might also keep notes of those moments when someone was hearing you and how you knew this was the case. This exercise is a good place to make use of keeping a listening journal. Use your list to write in essay form what you have learned about listening from this exercise. What were the signs you noticed? What were the feelings you noticed? *This is an exercise about you and your self-awareness.* Keep this as your focus.

This information that enables you to know when someone is or isn't listening to you is *information you already have internally*. All of us tend to fail to make use of it as a way to improve our own listening. This is your opportunity to discover and make use of what you already know.

Exercises to Get Started

Nonverbal Communications

This exercise offers an opportunity to practice your skills in attending to nonverbal communications. Turn off the sound on the television and watch people who are speaking. This might be watching anything from a politician to a television evangelist, a sitcom or portion of a movie. What is your response to the nonverbal signals you "hear" from facial expressions, gestures, and so forth? What is the speaker communicating without the benefit of the sound? It might be interesting to tape the same segment you are watching and evaluating and later play it back with sound. How do the messages from the nonverbal and the sound version coordinate?

Becoming Open to Listening

The aim of this exercise is to prepare you for moments when receiving what is said may be increasingly difficult. By practicing listening in a non-threatening setting, you can develop "muscles" for being able to welcome and receive when it is difficult to do so. Settle somewhere where you can be comfortable, relaxed, and undisturbed. Select some enjoyable music. Listen to the music and make an effort to open yourself to receive the music. Do more than your accustomed listening. Welcome the music and receive it; be attentive to it; give it a place in your self. Keep paying attention to your quality of listening. How hospitable are you being to the music?

Choosing a Place to Grow

Pick a subject that you know little or nothing about but that may just be an issue you need to listen to in your ministry. Identify the source of your interest in this subject. What draws you to choose this particular subject? Make a note of what you discover about making this choice. Develop a plan for how you will learn about the subject. Put your plan in writing (in your journal) and follow through on it. This kind of plan could be a short-term plan or a long-term plan that might mean several years of study (not full time). As you learn more about the subject make some notes on your progress in feelings and attitudes about the subject. Place yourself in a context in which you will be able to have experiences related to the subject. For example, if you know little about prison life, arrange to visit a prison. This could be arranged through church groups that have programs of prison visitation or through a prison chaplain. If you know little about domestic violence, contact a shelter for battered women to arrange to speak with one of the staff. (For the sake of the safety of the women at the shelter, you probably will not be allowed to visit the shelter or speak with the women there.) Another option would be to locate an *open* Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to attend as an observer. Be certain it is an open meeting.

Trusting in Vulnerability

With a partner, arrange to take a walk guided by your partner while you wear a blindfold. The objective of this exercise is to work toward being

more comfortable with being vulnerable. When you are guided by someone else and not able to see for yourself where you are going and whether you are safe, feelings of vulnerability emerge. There is some similarity between the experience of this exercise and being willing to let the speaker take you where she or he might choose rather than following your guidance through questions, for example. You might experience resistance to trusting your partner, just as you would experience resistance to allowing the speaker to lead the conversation.

You and your partner could reverse roles and you take the lead in guiding your blindfolded partner around. The guide should not limit the trip you take to a smooth route, but allow the partner to encounter stairs, rocky paths, twists and turns. The partner who is blindfolded should not be able to see around the blindfold or the purpose of the experience is lost.

In your journal write briefly about your experience of being led around and being vulnerable to the leading of your partner. Also write about your feelings in being the one who is the leader, on whom your partner relies for a safe journey. You might want to share your reflections with your partner.

Testing Your Inner Senses

This exercise requires at least one partner and can be enhanced by having several partners in succession. Select people who differ in gender, height, race, or culture from you and from one another, in addition to selecting one who is most like you.

This is a simple exercise that involves merely walking toward one another. This exercise enables the participants to discover the inner sense they have about their own personal space and to evaluate their ability to sense and respect the space of each partner. The space you need is likely to vary from one partner to another (if they are different from one another).

Here are the specifications: You are to walk toward one another, looking at one another until you reach a zone of discomfort. When you feel you have gotten too close, back up and adjust your distance. You and your partner will have to work together on this, with each of you deciding what distance feels comfortable to you. It may be that your partner and you do not find a distance that is agreeable to both of you. How do you work out a compromise? The distance one finds comfortable depends on

one's life experiences, culture, size in relation to the partner, and the gender and race of the partner in relation to yours. There is no judgment involved in the distance each partner elicits.

You may discover that if you stand side by side rather than face-to-face, you will be able to feel comfortable with much less distance between you. Notice and write about your experience of your inner sense of the space you need and how it has differed with different partners. This sense of space is the same kind of sense you have about other issues in your experience of listening. Perhaps this exercise can help you trust what you sense. Take time to discuss the experiences with your partners.

CHAPTER ONE

LISTENING AS CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY

Introduction

The Scriptures use many different forms of the words listen, listened, hear, and heard. I located almost fifteen hundred references. The phrase often repeated to the people of Israel, "Hear, O Israel . . ." alerted the people to listen, to attend to the important words that would follow. The prophetic tradition that declared, "Thus says the Lord," emphasized the act of listening as the people were called to attention with these introductory words. In the ministry of Jesus, his parables frequently ended with the phrase, "Let whoever has ears to hear listen." How can we, then, ignore the importance of listening?

Whereas we have a strong scriptural tradition that emphasizes listening and hearing, I turn to the biblical image of hospitality for a theological grounding of the practice of listening, because hospitality bespeaks the kind of relationship best suited for listening and hearing. As I have worked with listening I have seen that there are some clear commonalities between hospitality and listening. Both deserve more importance in ministry. Therefore, in this chapter we will examine selected passages of scripture that deal with hospitality in order to explore how it can enrich our understanding and practice of listening.

The qualities required in hospitality—its essence—I propose are also those elements that are necessary for effective listening. An examination

of hospitality gives us a deeper, more nuanced understanding of listening. My purpose in exploring the relationship between hospitality and listening, at its heart, is to enable, encourage, and support the practice of more effective listening.

This chapter explores the meaning and practice of hospitality in a Christian context, identifying its implications for listening to one another. My hope is that seeing the connections and gaining greater understanding of hospitality will enhance the practice of listening on the part of those in ministry.

So what can we learn from an understanding of hospitality that will help us move toward better listening? Throughout this chapter I invite you to keep listening in mind as we discover more about hospitality. What we discover here about hospitality will lead to the practice of more effective listening.

A Scriptural Base for Hospitality

It took many years of reading the Bible before I began to become aware of the importance of hospitality in its message. Now I find it difficult to miss the significance of hospitality as I read the Scriptures. A familiar and foundational story of hospitality from the Scripture is found in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis. The story begins when three strangers arrive at the tent of Abraham and Sarah in the desert.

Dr. Dennis Groh describes the appropriate approach to a tent in the desert. Recognizing that the desert is itself less than hospitable, hospitality among those who travel the desert becomes extremely important. The one who approaches another's tent is required to sit at a distance from the tent and wait to be noticed. To approach unacknowledged can be seen as a threatening gesture. Once acknowledged, the host goes out to welcome the strangers who are then free to approach the tent.¹ Readers of Genesis 18 would benefit from holding this context in mind. Hospitality is culturally sensitive, which makes it important to be aware of the context in which hospitality is being experienced or observed.

In Genesis 18 Abraham noticed three men standing in the desert.² Abraham ran to greet them (v. 2). He welcomed the men to his tent and offered them water to wash with. Abraham was insistent in encouraging them to accept his hospitality and sensitive in acknowledging that they were on a journey and he did not intend to detain them once they were

refreshed (vv. 4-5). Sarah and their servants were enlisted to join in the quick preparation of a feast for these guests. The best flour and a plump calf were chosen to serve these strangers in the desert (vv. 6-8).

The guests, true to hospitality's form, offered their hosts something before leaving. They left the childless couple, well into old age, the promise that not only would the visitors return, but that Abraham and Sarah were still going to be parents (vv. 10-11). One of the men said that by the next year Sarah would be the mother of a son, which would fulfill the promise God had made to Abraham many years earlier. The visitors were offered excellent hospitality and they responded with a "hostess gift" of inestimable worth. This story of Abraham and Sarah is illustrative of a pervasive biblical attitude toward hospitality that we see again and again. Hospitality is required and hospitality is rewarded.

The story continued when the visitors left and Abraham walked a distance with them (v. 16). The Lord, who was entertained by Abraham and Sarah on this occasion, was on the way to Sodom in order to see firsthand whether the "outcry against Sodom" warranted its destruction for its wickedness (vv. 20-21). This visitor hung back, talking with Abraham, as Abraham negotiated with him to save the city from destruction. Abraham challenged the Lord's sense of justice in destroying any people in the city who were righteous along with those who were wicked (vv. 23-25). The Lord graciously agreed to each of the lowered stakes offered until Abraham got the Lord to agree that for the sake of ten righteous people Sodom would not be destroyed (vv. 24-32). I often wonder what the Lord would have done if Abraham's asking got down to one person.

When the strangers arrived in Sodom (there were then only two), Lot insisted that they accept his hospitality for the night, even though they resisted. Although he only offered water to wash their feet and a night's lodging, he provided for them a fine feast (19:2-4). After Lot and his guests had eaten, the men of the city, acting in stark contrast to Lot's hospitality, demanded that Lot send the strangers out in order that they "may know them" (v. 5). Lot took his role as host so seriously that he offered to protect his guests by handing over his own virgin daughters to the mob (v. 8).³ The purposes of the mob were thwarted with the help of the strangers, who set out a plan for rescuing Lot and his family from the sure destruction that would befall Sodom (vv. 9-17).

In becoming a host to the strangers, Lot had put himself in the role of protecting his guests. This is a further obligation of hospitality. Here the story of Lot's hospitality differs from the story of Abraham and Sarah. In

Lot's story it became necessary for Lot, as host, to protect his guests, a problem Abraham and Sarah did not face.

The guests, in turn, as they did with Abraham and Sarah, had something of significance to offer Lot and his household. Lot acted to protect his guests, and the guests turned out to be instrumental in the salvation of his family in their rescue.

The roles tend to turn around guest-to-host and host-to-guest when we examine hospitality. The visitor/guest comes with something significant to offer, not with empty hands. The guest comes with a need (for food, shelter, rest), but is not without a blessing to give. The host may anticipate that something will be received from the visitor, but there is no way to know what to expect. The host knows for sure that the household *will be affected by guests* who enter—something, or much, will change.

Central to this second story of hospitality is the bold contrast between the practice of hospitality and the absence of hospitality. Lot was the one who held to and practiced the value of hospitality. The people of Sodom, in their blatant hostility toward strangers, were destroyed for their lack of hospitality—indeed, their *hostility* toward *hospitality*. Every man of the city, “both young and old, all the people to the last man,” participated in the mob that demanded that the strangers be handed over to them; so Abraham’s bargain with the Lord to save Sodom for the sake of ten who were righteous was off. Sodom would not be spared. However, the rescue of Lot and his family members who consented to go with him seems to affirm the upholding of God’s justice. Where there was true hospitality, in Lot’s household, the people were spared.

From the beginning of the story of the people of Israel, hospitality is a core value. Their experiences of being strangers in foreign lands, being slaves in Egypt, and wandering in the desert gave the people a clear sense of the value of hospitality. Being hospitable became a sign of being faithful. The tradition of referring to those who are faithful to God as sons and daughters of Abraham points back to the centrality of this story to the people of Israel.

New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament we find vivid messages about hospitality. I have selected a few to examine here; primarily my focus will be on the story of the “sinful” woman in Luke, chapter seven. This story

began when Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee to eat. We see similar qualities of hospitality in this very different story.

The Outrageous Host

When we read descriptions of biblical events we tend to picture them through our modern-day experience. We would see Jesus coming to the house of the Pharisee, Simon, joining others who were invited, and taking a chair at a table. We must allow ourselves to see where there are differences that do not match our assumptions if we are to come closer to understanding the meaning of the passage. William Herzog offers this description:

Kenneth Bailey has argued that the meal held in Simon's house was a public occasion. Although not everyone was invited to recline at table with the supposedly honored guest, everyone was invited to sit around the wall of the *triclinium* (dining room) and listen to the Pharisees discuss Torah with their visitor.⁴

The scene, thus interpreted, relies on seeing the function of the home of the Pharisee as a place where the synagogue could be extended, where the people could gather to listen to the study and discussion of Torah between invited guests and the Pharisees.⁵ With this understanding, we might see Jesus' easy question to Simon as kicking off the discussion and teaching.

What a different picture we get when we add all the villagers who sit around the wall observing the events and listening to what is said. The scene changes when we take away the chairs to envision invited guests reclining at the table. We have to struggle to picture the scene as it was, with Jesus lying facing the table with his feet stretched out toward the wall of the room.⁶ This arrangement accounts for the scriptural description of the woman's location in relation to Jesus, “She stood *behind him* at his feet” (v. 38). Picturing the event from our context, with Jesus seated at the table in a chair, makes this a puzzling image, and the woman a bit of a contortionist.

Because Jesus was an honored guest, being invited to eat at the table, it was customary that he would be shown certain acts of hospitality as he arrived. Simon's neglect of these duties of hospitality did not go unnoticed. In failing to honor Jesus with required expressions of hospitality, Simon's behavior was an insult to Jesus.⁷ Other guests who may already

have been present and those who were sitting around the walls would have noticed the failure of Simon to act as host to Jesus. The woman could have been one of these witnesses or perhaps she could have heard from someone who was there at the time when Jesus arrived.

The sinful (unclean) woman reached out to Jesus from her place by the wall and began to kiss and bathe his feet with ointment and her tears, and then dry his feet with her hair (vv. 37-38). Every one of her actions reverses one of the insults that Simon has inflicted on Jesus.⁸ Her behavior was outrageous. She not only touched Jesus' feet, but she had let her hair down in public, which was culturally prohibited. Since the Pharisees considered her unclean, her touch made Jesus unclean in their eyes. The host of this event saw the attention Jesus was receiving as reflecting badly on Jesus. He muttered to himself that if Jesus were truly a prophet he would know what kind of woman she was and would not let her touch him (v. 39).

Jesus responded to his host's criticism with a simple story about a creditor and two debtors, each forgiven of their debts. Jesus asked Simon, the Pharisee, an easy question: Which debtor would love the creditor more? Simon answered that the one whose debt was greater would love the creditor more. After affirming the answer Simon gave (vv. 40-43), Jesus brought the point of the story home and called to Simon's attention Simon's serious neglect of the requirements of hospitality.⁹ Jesus said:

Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. (vv. 44-47)

The appreciation Jesus expressed for hospitality was clear. Simon hadn't even seen the connection between his lack of hospitality and the woman's generous hospitality. Simon had no right to judge the woman when he had neglected to offer Jesus, his guest, the very basic hospitality that was expected. The sinful woman "showed up" the righteous Pharisee, and did so in his own home. Her hospitality offered Jesus the very basics that Simon had neglected to give to Jesus as his guest. She might not have kept all of the laws of the Torah, but she knew and demonstrated what truly counted.

Hospitality for Jesus

In Matthew we see further support for the very high importance given to hospitality in the Christian faith. Jesus described the final judgment. His description of separating out those who are blessed by God reflects the very basis for receiving blessings as acts of hospitality.

"... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:35-40)

Hospitality stands out as a crucial requirement for those who would follow Jesus. There is a surprise in this passage that we cannot miss. Here is another turnabout in which *Jesus becomes the guest* when we offer hospitality to one who is in need. What is the message here about hospitality?

We continue by examining the passages presented to discover some essential elements of hospitality. As we do so, we begin to create the foundation for the subsequent chapters of this book in which the connections between hospitality and listening will be defined. Each of the characteristics or elements—vulnerability, humility, thoughtful availability, and reciprocity—which can be seen as central to the practice of hospitality, is also central to the practice of effective listening. Seeing them through the eyes of valued hospitality, we discover these same values to be present in listening, as well.

The Four Core Qualities of Hospitality

Vulnerability

We see from the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Lot that offering hospitality involves vulnerability. Abraham and Lot were quick and

persistent in inviting strangers into their homes. We might assume that they shrewdly evaluated the strangers or saw some god/angel likeness in their demeanor, but the texts do not make this clear. Both Abraham and Lot greeted the strange men by bowing down to the ground and referring to them as lords. Lot and Abraham each referred to himself as "your servant." Such greetings were a show of respect and not greetings reserved just for God or angels.

Lot and his family became vulnerable, facing danger because of the hospitality Lot offered to the strangers. His invitation and welcome placed him in a threatened position as their host. The danger was not from the strangers themselves, but from the response of the people of the city to the presence of the strangers and to Lot's having offered them hospitality.

Perhaps Lot had himself experienced the antihospitable attitude of the people of Sodom. The men who came to take the strangers said of Lot, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge!" (Genesis 19:9). Obviously, he had not been welcomed as "one of them" by the people of Sodom. His experience prior to this particular evening might have warned Lot that the strangers would be treated badly if they remained in the square, and his invitation and welcome could have been extended with full awareness of the danger it might pose to him and to his family. As a "son of Abraham" Lot chose to do what was right. Hospitality can bring with it vulnerability to danger.

Danger such as Lot faced in offering hospitality is seen throughout history. People in danger are welcomed into homes even when the hosts recognize that the danger their guests face is likely to come on them. In Germany during the Holocaust, many Christians became traditionally the "sons and daughters of Abraham" when they took in and hid Jews whose lives were endangered. During slavery in America, persons who opened their homes to runaways and prepared their way on the Underground Railroad risked their own safety to enable slaves to travel toward freedom. In just these two examples we can see the amazing power of hospitality to draw people into danger in order to do what is expected by their faith—or just to do what they know is right.

We see another image of vulnerability in the woman who risked to offer Jesus hospitality. She reversed the indignity offered to Jesus by the Pharisee who was the host. She behaved outrageously. She placed herself at risk to offer the honor she was able to provide to one she very obviously saw as worthy of the deepest kind of hospitality possible. She made a spectacle of herself by her behavior. Her behavior also made a spectacle of Simon, the host. I envision the sneer on Simon's face as he watched her,

seeing only her sinfulness, without recognizing that this woman was out-doing him in hospitality. She subjected herself to being seen as offensive by everyone present (except Jesus, of course). Her courage is impressive.

When we open our doors to strangers, we put ourselves and our loved ones at risk. When we open a tent flap, a door, or our heart to someone else, there is the potential of being hurt. We realize that there's a risk in being vulnerable. Hospitality (and the vulnerability it involves) does not happen without our openness to another—opening up to their presence and the impact it may have on our lives.

Sometimes it seems in America today we have a great emphasis on the fears that surround our lives. Children are warned not to speak to strangers. "Stranger danger" is involved when we are open to others whom we do not know well.¹⁰ Some persons who are strangers come with a friendly appearance and behavior that causes us not to identify them as strangers. (It has been shown that children are particularly vulnerable to friendly *appearing* strangers.) We cannot look at a person we do not know and reliably evaluate whether they are a threat or not. In offering hospitality, there are risks involved. Being open in any way makes us vulnerable.

Vulnerability takes other forms. When someone enters with need, we wonder whether their needs are genuine. We may worry about how we will be able to respond. We may be concerned about being found lacking in what they need from us and that we would fail in some way at hospitality. These possibilities also cause feelings of vulnerability. All of these feelings of vulnerability emerge beyond being wary about the stranger's intentions. Opening the door to the safety of our home ushers in vulnerability, for the one opening the door and for those who would enter as guests. Vulnerability, as we are open to others, opens us up to criticism, which we do not become vulnerable to when we remain closed.

Vulnerability is not for hosts alone. Guests also place themselves in positions of vulnerability when they accept the hospitality offered to them. How can they be sure that what is being offered will be what they actually will receive? Or will they be endangered by the one offering hospitality? Will accepting an invitation prove to be safe? In addition, when one receives hospitality, the one who is the guest may feel that there is a demand for repayment through a return invitation, for example. We have seen that hospitality is rewarded, but a sense of obligation does not seem to fit with a true understanding of hospitality. Hospitality as it is offered to those in need may involve guests who are not able to repay in a traditional sense.

Part of our struggle with feeling vulnerable comes from the recognition that being vulnerable may bring change. The lives of all of the biblical characters we have seen were dramatically changed. Abraham and Sarah became parents in their old age. Lot's family was rescued from their destroyed city and forced to relocate. The gracious woman in Luke experienced forgiveness and salvation. These are incredible life changes. We see again that vulnerability requires great courage. To face the risk of the unknown; to face the inevitability of change in one's life; and to do so freely is a challenge for any of us in our bravery quotient.

Humility

As we think about humility in hospitality, keep in mind that the discussion here is leading us to a fresh look at listening. What we see here about hospitality, we will later see as true about listening.

Offering hospitality involves humility on the part of both the host and the guest. In acts of hospitality the primary focus is on the one in need who will become the guest and recipient of the hospitality. By being the guest, humility is already part of the package. The guest is the one in need and the host is the one who has something the guest needs.

The host who welcomes the guest with arrogance and showiness violates the true nature of hospitality, and may be satisfying her or his need to receive appreciation from others. "Look! What a fine host!" is not the response one seeks when offering true hospitality. Hospitality is done with quietness and humility. Humility is in the recognition that what I have to offer is limited, and I recognize that even as a generous host I do not have everything my guests might need—or even everything I need myself.

Abraham and Sarah had long waited for the heir promised by God. They had given up on the promise without losing their faithfulness. Sarah's laughter when she hears the guests renew the promise reflects her long-past-hope condition. These two were clearly people standing in need even as they opened their tent to strangers in the desert. As people in need they also recognized that they had something to offer and that the strangers, at this point in time, needed what they could offer.

Abraham offered his guests a morsel of bread and a little water to wash their feet, and acknowledged that they would, of course, want to move on to their destination without further ado after they had rested and had a bit of nourishment. He was the very model of humility. The guests accepted his hospitality. Then Abraham burst into action *rushing* to get

Sarah to make the bread *quickly* (from the best flour), *running* to get the best calf and have it prepared *hastily*.

The first offerings of a brief rest, a bit of bread, and a little water to wash with were greatly diminished, humble gestures, meant to downplay the efforts required to provide hospitality. To make the guests feel that their hosts had been "put upon" or "put out" in offering hospitality would have been in poor taste. It would have been extremely inappropriate for Abraham and Sarah to brag about what a feast they would offer their guests, if their guests stopped by. Their rush to get things underway, however, demonstrated their willingness to set themselves aside for the sake of focus on their guests and emphasized the importance of the guests—signs of humility.

Following the model of Abraham and Sarah, Lot also downplayed what he would provide for the guests. Both Abraham and Lot refer to the strangers as "Lord" and to themselves as their servants. The image of service in the context of hospitality is quite appropriate. The one who offers hospitality places him or herself in a role of *servant* to the guest, by some cultural standards a further dimension of humility.

In contrast, Simon the Pharisee's neglect of offering hospitality to Jesus was a dramatic *failure of humility*. Simon seems to have been all about out-doing Jesus (keep in mind the increasing numbers who were following Jesus). Inviting Jesus to come to his home, enjoy a meal, and enter into the theological discussion was designed to show Jesus up for the false prophet Simon thought him to be.

The woman, instead, demonstrated extreme humility, anointing and weeping on Jesus' feet, kissing his feet and wiping them with what she had available, her hair. This is what she had to offer and she was willing to do so even though she knew that the people present at the banquet would look down on her and shun her. She risked degradation in order to be the one to offer Jesus the hospitality that both society and religion demanded.

In both the stories of Lot and of Jesus at Simon's house we have failures of hospitality that are in extreme contrast to the true hospitality offered by the heroes of the stories. Where the community should have been participating in offering hospitality to strangers, it offered instead threat to their lives. Where Simon should have offered Jesus the hospitality due to a prominent guest, the woman considered unclean offered hospitality.

We cannot presume that hospitality is limitless. The guest who comes and stays forever, the visitor who rudely intrudes on the family that has

offered hospitality, are presumptuous and low on awareness as well as on humility. When hospitality is offered—offered with humility—it is done with a sense of one's limitations and recognition of the limitations of the others involved—family members and the guests who have been received. Abraham's welcome to the strangers in the desert was given with recognition that they were on a journey and that he did not intend to detain them. He was there to offer them refreshment, and they were free to pursue their journey. The recognition of limitations of what the guests might want is part of hospitality. Even when they are urged to accept the hospitality offered, they are not diverted from the demands of their own lives.

There would be no need for hospitality if everyone could live independently under all circumstances without the presence, care, or service of others. This being the case, there would no longer be any humility, either. Humility is recognition that one has limits, and includes awareness of the limitations of others and the appropriate boundaries within which we function.

Humility recognizes that hospitality is not limitless. It has boundaries. Humility embraces an awareness of one's limitations, shortcomings, and flaws. It includes a sense of an appropriate self-assessment—truly seeing oneself *in perspective* as neither “all that” nor “not at all.” Humility allows one to offer service to another through hospitality and to do so without devaluing oneself. Humility, rather than diminishing oneself, offers a “right way” of seeing oneself that is required for providing appropriate hospitality. Why aren't we more consistently able to look at ourselves with this realistic perspective—seeing both who we are and who we are not, and at the same time realizing our place in God's family?

Thoughtful Availability

“Thoughtful availability,” Dennis Groh's descriptive phrase for Abraham's standing by under the tree while his guests ate, seems very applicable to an understanding of the character of hospitality.¹¹ Our stance as listeners will draw on this image of thoughtful availability. The image of thoughtful availability reminds me of the host who stands by, attentive to the needs of the guest, jumping up from the table to refill a water glass when it is empty, inquiring whether the guest has had enough to eat or whether she would “Like a little more . . . ?”

The image of thoughtful availability reminds me of servers in elegant restaurants, present to every need of the guests, anticipating what they

will want or need next—alert to serve. The role of being a servant may be downplayed as insignificant or humiliating, but it is a role we take on when we act to offer hospitality. Groh further describes his concept, “To be a host like Abraham is to make one's personal presence available to the guest—to form a receptive alliance with the guest.”¹² “At your service” seems like an appropriate phrase to reflect thoughtful availability.

My colleague Dr. Roland Kuhl proposes a shift from understanding ministry by using a model of leadership more prominent in the business world, to understanding ministry by using a model of servanthip.¹³ His view aligns with the view of hospitality I present here. He points out that Jesus offered us the basis for the image of ministry as servanthip in John 13:14-15: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Far from being demeaning, the role of servant and service to one another is honored by Jesus in word and deed.

Thoughtful availability means going beyond the needs for food and drink, to being alert to other needs for the comfort of the guest. This is clearly a characteristic that was missing from Simon. He failed to give his focus to Jesus as his guest in the way Groh describes hospitality; instead his focus on Jesus revealed a defensive stance. Simon thought to himself that Jesus was certainly not “all that.” He couldn't possibly be the prophet some claimed he was. Now Simon had the evidence. If Jesus were a prophet, surely he would have agreed with Simon's view of the woman, and Jesus would not have allowed her to fawn over him, actually touching him.

Simon's attention directed toward Jesus was so intent on and captive to his defensiveness that it was very far from being thoughtful availability. Simon's disregard of offering Jesus the required rituals of hospitality demonstrated that he was ready to downgrade Jesus from any prophet status even before the thoughtful woman touched him. Simon's hospitality (inviting Jesus to his house) was really all about Simon's needs, not the needs of his guests.

As hosts we give our focus of attention to those who are our guests. Concerns about other matters are made secondary while we attend to the needs of our guests. Thoughtful availability directs our attention toward our guests and what we have that they need and we can offer them. Thoughtful availability places us in a servant mode, greatly valued in the model given to us by Jesus.

Reciprocity

We have already seen that host and guest share in vulnerability and humility, which become expressions of reciprocity. We take another step here in seeing the full participation of reciprocity in contexts of hospitality. Listening, we will see later, also is clearly reflective of reciprocity.

Abraham and Sarah participated in actions of hospitality aware of the potential reciprocity involved. The gift they received was so surprising that Sarah laughed at the possibility of the predicted birth—the absurdity that she could still give birth in her old age. Lot discovered that the hospitality he had shown to the strangers led to his and his family's rescue from death in the destruction of Sodom. The strangers became his family's means of survival in thwarting the intentions of the mob and in enabling them to escape from the imperiled city. These gifts were unexpected and surprisingly out of proportion to the hospitality that the hosts had offered. Even though our hosts, Abraham and Sarah and Lot and his family, *offered* their guests little, they, in truth, provided feasts for their visitors. Still, the gifts they received in return for their hospitality were “off the charts” of reciprocity.

The way-out-of-proportion nature of the gifts returned by those shown hospitality is evident in Jesus' encounter with the woman at Simon's house. Her gestures of hospitality toward Jesus, when Simon showed him none, were rewarded by the recognition of forgiveness of her sins, which Jesus identified as a result of her great love and by the assurance given to her by Jesus, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50).

Hospitality has rewards, as we see in Matthew 25, in which Jesus reveals that the basis for reward from God looks a lot like offering hospitality. This passage is also important in introducing the concept that hospitality being offered to those in need is hospitality offered to Jesus. Those who offer the one who is thirsty a drink are offering a drink to Jesus, who assures them of their reward. Once again, the reward is far out of proportion to the original hospitality that was offered—a cup of water for your salvation.

The biblical characters that take the role of host are not doing so in order to receive a reward. There is no guarantee of a gift in return for hospitality. A reward is not their focus. Their motivation arises out of the strong traditional expectation/demand that hospitality be offered to those in need.

Hospitality involves a giving and receiving process. When we are given to generously, we must be able to *receive* generosity offered to us. When

we are guests, we offer what we bring to the situation in which we are cast as the receivers. When we function as hosts, we give generously and must be open to receive what may come to us from our guest who originally came to us as one in need.

When we receive hospitality, we enter the situation as the ones in need, and yet we bring something the host needs. Some of us in the church, and especially in ministry, find it difficult to receive from others. Offering hospitality requires our willingness to receive from others *even as we are the ones in the position of offering hospitality*. We do not know what to expect, and may become uneasy at the prospect, and we still can feel assured that there will be *some* gift from the guest.

As guests we do not always know what we are going to bring to the host. This can feel uncomfortable for a guest who has not arrived with a traditionally identifiable hostess gift. What is more important in terms of reciprocity happens, though, in what takes place in the space of the visit, not so much in the offering of a box of candy that was brought for the host. The real gift from the guest is found in the relationship—in what transpires in their connection as host and guest.

For Abraham and Sarah, the gift was a renewal of the hope that God's promise to Abraham would indeed be fulfilled, in spite of the formidable barriers presented by the ages of the prospective parents. Hope was rekindled, even though Sarah laughingly responded to the announcement of their guests' prediction. The gift that is given is not the birth of a child, but the hope that lies in the promise revived.

Jesus' role as guest to Simon's invitation shifted to being guest to the caring woman who treated Jesus with the graciousness that Simon had neglected to demonstrate. In return, Jesus acknowledged to the woman what was already hers—both forgiveness and salvation. Abraham and Sarah's guests rekindle hope in what was already theirs (by God's promise). Within their interchanges as guests and hosts our biblical host-characters received invaluable gifts, which turn out (in two of the stories) to be reminders of what they already have.

The passage in Matthew 25:35-40 is joined by another in Hebrews to give us a further dimension of reciprocity.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, *as though you were in prison with them*; those who are being tortured, *as though you yourselves were being tortured*. (Hebrews 13:2-3, emphasis mine)

In Matthew, Jesus said the familiar, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40). In these passages from Matthew and Hebrews we learn that we are to *see ourselves* as though we are in the place of those to whom we offer acts of hospitality—in the place of those in need, in other words. Being able to put ourselves in the shoes of another person is a part of hospitality that may be understood as reciprocity.

In the now-to-be-expected turnaround, those in need are Jesus. What we offer them, to meet their needs, is as though we offer it to Jesus. This passage also recalls the tradition of Abraham and Sarah and their guests in the desert, reinforcing the view that they offered generous hospitality unaware of the identity of those they served. My conclusion is that being Christian means being hospitable.

The Hebrews passage noted above points out that when we offer hospitality we do so with recognition that we put ourselves in the place of the one who is in need. When we offer, as hosts, we are to remember that we are also receiving in the place of the guest. The guest's struggle is our struggle. We identify with the person to whom we offer hospitality; we identify with the guest, the one who is in need, to whom we respond with our hospitality.

One woman offered a demonstration of reciprocity in hospitality during her terminal stay in the hospital. Shirley became the enthusiastic host of everyone who served her during her stay. Here she was the guest in terms of their care for her, but she persistently took on the role of being host to them. She insisted, even as she grew weaker, on having someone take her picture with each and every person who helped her or offered her service (and hospitality). Her camera was always nearby. When someone took her to X-ray, his or her picture was taken with her. When someone cleaned her room or changed her bed, their pictures were taken with her. Those who pushed her wheelchair from place to place were required to pose for their photo with her. Every visitor, every staff member; no one was left out. Every service person, no matter how small their task, went into her growing album. Shirley's actions reveal the back-and-forth, shifting between giving and receiving, alternating nature of hospitality that we are identifying as reciprocity in hospitality.

Shirley enthusiastically honored each person with whom she came into contact while she was in the hospital. I do not have a clearer image of someone keeping the faith. The roles of host and guest shifted regularly. Her ability to maintain reciprocity in her relationships with those

upon whose service she was dependent was inspiring. The host on hand was clearly Jesus, as he was also the one who was represented in each person who served Shirley. Clearly she served Jesus in every person she honored. Those who served her also served Jesus.

Obedience in Hospitality

In addition to the qualities of hospitality that have been discussed and that we will be exploring in relation to the practice of listening in ministry, there is another further issue in relation to hospitality. Not only have we seen that hospitality is expected, but we also can see that hospitality is demanded/commanded. In order to be obedient followers of Jesus, we *must be* those who offer hospitality. In this section we will look at the issue of obedience in relation to hospitality. Might we also be *expected* to listen as part of our obedience to God?

In our examples from the Hebrew Scriptures, we see that our hosts were well aware of the requirement of both their faith and their culture to welcome strangers—to offer hospitality to those in need. Out of his commitment to what was expected by his faith, Lot insisted, against the resistance of the strangers, that they come to his home for the night rather than stay in the town square where they intended to remain (perhaps, from what the strangers had heard about Sodom, they had expected no one to offer them hospitality).¹⁴ In the story about Jesus and the hospitable woman, the Pharisee, above all, should have been the one who was obedient; instead, the woman Simon viewed as unclean (as one who didn't keep the laws of the Torah) was the one who took up the command to offer hospitality.¹⁵ The true host often emerges as an unexpected participant in the scene, as the one who is willing to be obedient. In the story of the Good Samaritan the surprising host turns out not to be the priest, and not the Levite, but the Samaritan, who was obedient and took on the role of being host to the robbed and beaten man.¹⁶ The Samaritan's role as host did not end when he handed the wounded man over to another host, for he continued to provide what the man would need after he left him—he supplied another host to take over the role of host in his place and subsidized the new host.

First Peter 4:9 makes hospitality a direct order: "Be hospitable to one another without complaining." Within the list in which Paul defines the marks of the true Christian, along with "Love one another," "Rejoice in

hope,” and “Do not repay anyone evil for evil,” we find “Extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom. 12:9-17). Who we are as Christians is hospitable. That is what is expected of us in doing the will of God under the guidance of Jesus Christ. We are those who extend hospitality to the stranger, welcome others, offer the needy what they lack, and give others space in our homes and hearts.

Interconnections of the Characteristics of Hospitality

Whereas I have gone to some lengths to understand hospitality by defining four different characteristics found in hospitality, these characteristics do not separate from one another neatly or clearly. We see that courage is necessary for both humility and vulnerability, and sometimes for thoughtful availability. Silence is an issue in thoughtful availability and in reciprocity, but also in humility. Conflict can bring all of the characteristics into play, calling on their presence to offer resolution.

Prayer, along with conflict, calls for the presence and interweaving of all four characteristics of hospitality. Humility, vulnerability, and thoughtful availability may be most evident in prayer, but I would challenge an understanding of prayer that excludes reciprocity. The characteristics of hospitality might be seen as a team working together as we proceed to see their application in listening.

Connecting Hospitality and Listening

In this chapter we have unpacked hospitality as it appears in several Scriptures. We see core qualities present in acts of hospitality: vulnerability, humility, thoughtful availability, and reciprocity. We also learn that in order to be obedient and faithful, we must become those who offer hospitality.

Hospitality requires that there be host and guest. At first sight we recognize who is the host and who are the guests, but we have discovered that the roles of host and guest may shift in the midst of a scene or as the scene comes to a close. We discover that this will also happen in acts of listening.

Hospitality involves the acts of welcoming and receiving, which are the essence of listening. When we indicate that we are willing to listen to someone, we have welcomed that person. When we listen and hear another person, we have received them. When we listen, we open ourselves not only to hear, but also to being vulnerable to our own pain as well as to the pain of the other. We recognize humility—having a right perspective on ourselves—which is required in order to be able to offer appropriate hospitality and effective listening.

What we experience and do in that process of welcoming and receiving in the practice of listening is the focus for the following chapters. We will in each of the next four chapters pick up one of the qualities of hospitality that have been presented and examine them as they can be brought to bear on our practice of listening.

Focus Questions

Recall a time when you experienced true hospitality.

What was the occasion?

Where were you?

Who provided the hospitality?

What was unexpected in the experience?

Can you name specific indicators that identified this experience as one of hospitality?

How did it feel to you to be the guest?

Exercise 1: Attentive Listening

Preparation: If you are using this book as a part of a class or any small group setting, this exercise is designed to take place during the first or second session within the context of the session/class. Participants should take the opportunity to introduce themselves to others, choosing to share something significant about themselves. This is not an opportunity for participants to tell where they are from or whether they are single or married. This is an opportunity to offer others something that is important to you, but may not be known by others. Offer something that feels comfortable to share. It is an opportunity to give others something to remember. Introductions should be random and not follow a course around the

room from one side to the other. The leader should go first to model the exercise, but also to give participants some time to think. In this way, the leader also models hospitality. The leader should ask participants to share at will.

The Exercise: Now you are prepared. You no longer have to focus on yourself and what you are going to have to say. Put your introduction to the side until you are ready to present it and give the other participants your focus. The plan is for you to be able to fully attend to what the others are telling you about themselves. This is a challenge in listening. Your temptation will likely be to respond to what someone else says when you have heard a connection with your own life. "I came from Cincinnati, too. What school did you go to?"

The exercise is to practice *not* doing that. Listen as clearly as possible. Remember everyone's name. Feel free to ask for any clarifications you want from a speaker, not prolonging the exercise unduly. If you are comfortable with doing so and would find it helpful, make notes during the introductions. Notes can be about your own listening or to help you remember what others say and help you remember their names.

Follow-up: Make some notes to yourself about what you were doing as others spoke. When you lost focus on the speaker notice what led you away. Evaluate how well you are able to remain focused on the person speaking and do not be busy revising your own introduction. This is a good point for using a listening journal. Think about how you might work on anything you discovered that hindered your listening. What have you learned about your listening?

CHAPTER TWO

PREPARING TO LISTEN: HUMILITY IN LISTENING

Introduction

The greatest gift we bring to the listening process is ourselves. And the most important thing to do in order to listen well is to *keep ourselves out of the way*. Here we have a fundamental paradox in listening. We bring to the task of listening our lives of experiences—what we have learned in relationships with family and friends, in church and community, in classes and supervision for ministry, in clinical pastoral education, and in ministry experiences. *Something* in all of this will help us understand what someone says to us, but *any of this also has the potential for blocking what we are able to hear*.

Human experience draws us, as we listen to another, to "filling in" from our own lives, in which case we *tend not to hear* the person to whom we are "listening." Our own experience takes the focus and abandons its potential for being a *gift for listening* and becomes instead a *barrier to listening*. Self-awareness enables us to recognize when we are getting in the way of the listening we are trying to do—when we have added our own experience to the speaker's story.

In order to listen accurately to another person we need unflinching, compassionate, and bold self-awareness. We only achieve self-awareness when we are able to see ourselves with appropriate humility. Effective listening emerges in a context of appropriate humility and honest self-awareness.