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“HEARING TO SPEECH”: A PARTICIPATORY THEOLOGY OF WORD-DWELLING AS CONGREGATIONAL FORMATION IN GOD’S MISSION

DAVID HAHN

INTRODUCTION

Allow me initial place to recognize my own social location as a white, Cisgender male, writing from the whitest denomination in the US, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.¹ From a personal and professional perspective, my thoughts below have in mind the continuing impact of whiteness as a pervasive preoccupation with mastery over others that subsumes both difference and distinctions.² As a leader of congregations, I have witnessed this implicit bias present among them, and I see how it continues to inform both the theory and practice of much of our faith communities. Congregational reticence to engage spiritual practices of listening may, in fact, be tied into these larger cultural biases as well. Listening holds place for reflecting on one’s own social position and offers a critical place for doing faithful theological engagement.

During my own work with congregational leaders and seminary students in training, listening has not received the kind of attention that it deserves, considering the power deeper listening can provide for forming congregational vitality in God’s emerging future. When listening does matter for congregations, as I’ve seen it, it is more often than not reduced to a quick-fix technique that ameliorates anxious, depressed and declining congregational systems for not delivering the kind of abundant churches more reflective of Christendom’s expectations. One of the things this discloses is a congregation’s lack of theological clarity for where and how God relates to their work of discernment. Greater consideration of listening practices holds special place for gaining clarity, formation and confidence to

where congregations' claim to attention needs to be as an explicitly theological discourse.

I am convinced that listening offers possibilities to mitigate colonizing and oppressive tendencies through the power of the Holy Spirit. I will suggest that a unique approach to reading Scripture, known as “hearing to speech”, found in the practice of Dwelling in the Word, creates the conditions of possibility for mitigating these tendencies. This possibility is given theological significance particularly as it moves participants toward engagement with difference, that is, otherness as the constituting ground for where new futures are being given, created and shared. This also finds participatory parallels in the Spirit's leadership with the Word of Christ as heard to speech by God.

I will proceed in three ways. First, I will introduce Dwelling in the Word and its engagement of the “hearing to speech” practice. Second, I explore “hearing to speech” *as the central context* emerging between persons that gives rise to both a theological orientation and a necessary creaturely practice of responsible silence. I draw on the rich listening work of Rachel Muers, a Quaker theologian, to consider the importance of attending to listening theologically. Finally, I wish to end with an anecdote from two pastors whose experience illustrates the power Dwelling in the Word offers to congregations.

DWELLING IN THE WORD

Dwelling in the Word, here after referred to as Dwelling, is a modified form of *lectio Divina*.³ The process begins with a reading of a short text (e.g. Luke 17:11-21, Acts 2:1-12, etc.), and continues, after some silence, by pairing up with one other person, “*a reasonably friend-looking stranger*.” Each pair explores one of the prompts: (1) what caught your imagination, (2) what word or phrase stuck out to you, or (3) what do you hear the Spirit nudging in you. Each person is given a couple minutes to reply to the prompt while the other person listens and takes notes. Once each has shared, the pairs return to the larger group where the facilitator asks persons to relay what was heard from their reasonably friend-looking stranger. What makes this exercise distinct is that it is a practice primarily in hearing the other person to speech, relaying what you heard the other say, a practice of re-voicing.

Dwelling, while a fairly simple practice, is laced with phenomenological richness.⁴ First, the Dwelling practice gives

opportunities to engage with others by inviting people to find a reasonably friendly-looking stranger to Dwell with. Practicing life with strangers is a necessary way to open up the possibilities for what emerges through listening practices. Unfortunately, most churches who still prefer familial metaphors to describe their systems do not entertain such possibilities as fruitful. The intentional humor in the invitation seeks to break the anxiety and welcomes the possibility of disruptions.

This practice is also a socially embodied practice in that persons are invited to stand up and roam about the room to turn to one another through their gaze and gestures. It is a social practice in that persons receive others at the intersection of possible differences, and where those different perspectives are encouraged to be taken seriously, and publicly. It is these spaces where the listening practice gives opportunities for persons to learn to suspend their own thinking long enough to receive possibilities of difference, even strangeness.

When the group reconvenes, we invite persons to share what the other person has said. This sharing, or “re-voicing”, practice in Dwelling in the Word functions in a similar way to Nelle Morton’s “hearing to speech.” The phrase bubbles up in her book, *A Journey is Home*.⁵ Morton, a Christian feminist theologian, gathered women to make space to communally receive the particularity of their experiences. Morton’s “hearing to speech” was born in her recognition that women’s life experiences, amid a backdrop of patriarchy, had in fact become silenced and were in need of liberative companionship. Listening as a central practice held space where women could explore their own voices as drawn out by listening others.

Dwelling in the Word shares similar impulses of Morton’s practice of “hearing to speech” in partnership with a biblical text. “Hearing to speech” within the reading of sacred texts invites a kind of reading that relies on listening as the central mediating practice for discerning God’s Word in the Spirit.

Dwelling in the Word follows what W. Randolph Tate, in his book, *Biblical Interpretation*, refers to as “the world in front of the text.”⁶ This approach to reading the Scriptural text does not deny or minimize the importance of either “the world behind the text,” i.e. historical context, or “the world within the text,” i.e. a literary method. Instead, it seeks to negotiate and open up lay audiences to receiving God’s Word through the particular voice of another while

simultaneously disclosing the Spirit-led creative power convened in the interactive mode of listening. In this way, the method itself finds internal coherence to the theological truth being discerned.

What “hearing to speech” opens up is a broader awareness for what additional contexts should be considered in the discernment process. For this instance, it is the context of personal interactions in their listening postures. In many faith communities, for example, the term *context* conjures up notions of demographic contexts surrounding a local church. Context also, however, includes personal interactions of gaze, gestures, and the host of communicative processes. This latter form of context recognizes sociality as itself a context where spiritual practices of listening hold possibility for birthing renewed transformative life in the Spirit.

“Hearing to speech”, as a context, implicates the listeners in their own complicit and adaptive work of transformation. If we are going to begin attending to the dominating cultural conditioning of mastery, “man-splaining”, and other implicit biases embedded in the patriarchal, hetero-normative environments, then it is helpful to focus on listening interactions. For spiritual practices of listening offer powerful, liberating qualities to the hearer as much as to the heard.

That the conversational interaction is under represented as a matter of attention might partially be understood in how the West privileges speaking over listening. It privileges the speaking through the priority of logos where listening itself becomes a subordinate role, and with no regard to intentional mutuality and reciprocity within spiritual practices of listening.⁷

Listening as “hearing to speech,” for the Christian, is interwoven to the sociological since its very life is constituted in the power of a social understanding of God’s nature as Triune. For even God’s life might be understood as Community of Listeners, God-Son-Spirit. Spiritual practices of listening, then, are a formative context for Spirit-led renewal as it is here where we can theologially conceive of otherness as a constituting ground for central context of listening, and appropriate forms of participation for loving God and neighbor. While the West might privilege autonomous individuality, and it’s psychologically interior orientation as the primary theological point of departure, it is at the intersection of the “the spaces between” where listening helps to emphasize and provoke persons to more intentionally negotiate broader horizons than only one’s own.

I think of this as a necessary shift, and a theologically constituting movement from the center of one's own familiarity to the dislocating margins of one's unfamiliarity, if not strange otherness. In order for this movement to happen there must be the willingness to cross a threshold of sorts. "Hearing to speech" invites such a crossing, and invites a willingness to be disturbed.⁸ "Hearing to speech" as a disruptive practice from isolated interiority into public sociality is a movement of the Spirit's leadership. It is this crossing-the-threshold where the Spirit opens persons up in order to move them from a place of reception to recognition, and a recognition that does not have to be reduced or conflated to sameness.

As shown below, Rachel Muers develops these ideas theologically in ways that I've found helpful.

GOD'S MISSION OF HEARING THE WORLD TO SPEECH IN JESUS

When a local church shares in God's mission it takes the form of God's own communal life. Martin Luther, in his commentary to the Gospel of John, wrote: "In the beginning was the conversation, and the conversation was God." In these brief words one can come to a renewed imagination for conceiving how God is present for the world: God as conversation in God-Son-Spirit. If we are to image the three as persons in communion, we might also extend, as is also Scripturally narrated, their interactive communion as one of listening, not just of speaking - and of listening as receiving the otherness and freedom of the divine other in fullness, and mutual reciprocity.

Rachel Muers helpfully builds on Morton's concept of "hearing to speech," arguing that it is best understood not only as a spiritual practice, but more centrally as the constituting nature of God's very life. Muers primes the pump by asking the question, "Who hears?" and "Who is heard?"⁹ For Muers, it is God who hears, and Jesus Christ who is heard. She continues that it is God who hears the world into speech through the hearing of Jesus Christ into resurrected freedom. This theological framing opens up God as a community in and with the world, and as one who is defined as a Divine Listener, listening another, i.e. the Son Jesus, to free speech.

There is also a necessity, for Muers, to root the communal life of God in the resurrection because it recognizes a God who "hears to

speech” those whose experience is hopeless. That God hears the Son to speech honors the work of the Son and Spirit who raise Jesus to newness of life, and there hope is born from death and despair. God’s own silence, as Muers reminds us, becomes a substantive theological claim. For even others who stand under the weight and burden of oppressive systems are given hope by the One who is willing to listen them into free speech.

Listening as a liberating work of oppressive systems is something that both the heard and hearer have respective responsibility to attend to. For the purposes of this article we consider responsibility on the side of the hearer. Rachel Muers deepens the significance of these interactive listening dynamics from the side of creaturely listening when she turns to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “ministry of listening” in *Life Together* as spiritual care. Muers suggests Bonhoeffer’s “ministry of listening” is a pairing of “uncovering sin and educating into the hearing of the word.”¹⁰ From the perspective of spiritual carers, the silence that listening affords involves one’s own work of uncovering sin in order to educate into hearing.

For Muers “uncovering of sin” is about liberating persons “from the idolatries that prevent genuine hearing...so that ‘educating to hearing’ is simply a matter of removing the obstacles to a ‘hearing’ that is treated as unproblematic.”¹¹ This silence functions, then, as a *responsible silence* where the spiritual carer can attend, not only to the others voice, but also to their own problematic “osbtacles” hindering faithful hearing. For Muers, the spiritual carer:

practices communicative kenosis; she refuses to claim the power that might otherwise accrue to her, either as the bearer of an office (in *Spiritual Care*) or simply as the one who offers help (in *Life Together*). The one who holds power, who has the possibility of ‘playing God’ through authoritative speech, gives up that power by falling silent. The act of giving up the power to speak in turn enables the other—previously ‘unheard’—to speak and be understood. Silence, again, makes explicit the relative nature of a given set of hierarchical distinctions.¹²

CONGREGATIONAL FORMATION AS PARTICIPATION IN GOD’S LISTENING

When local churches engage the practice of Dwelling in the Word they are participating in God’s own listening in the world. As God’s

freedom is lived in God's own otherness through the person of Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, so congregations socially embody this in their own ways of turning to one another. Dwelling in the Word provides a way to do so.

A local pastor reported that several women on the church leadership team were being silenced in a variety of ways by an older, white gentlemen, also serving on council (i.e. the congregation's primary leadership committee). The Pastor decided to introduce Dwelling as a disruptive practice. When he first introduced it, he noticed that the older gentlemen still did not understand the importance of suspending one's own voice in order to re-voice another's perspective as a central part of the practice. The next time the pastor introduced the practice he explicitly noted that Dwelling is a practice in listening to others, and then, to share what they said with the larger group, to which the older man cried out loud to the pastor, and the leadership team, "you're talking about me, aren't you?"

Needless to say, they continued with the practice, month after month. The pastor reported a change in the council leadership from this practice. While the older gentlemen never completely came into the fullness of the responsible silence described above, the pastor did report that women were finally experiencing more space to freely share in their council meetings. They also explicitly reported to the pastor that their own appreciation for the process of Dwelling that opened them up to more fully come into the space as mutual partner leaders of the congregation. Additionally, the pastor reported that the council meeting was also informed by Dwelling in that the ideas from Scripture that were engaged bubbled up throughout the meeting.

There is another instance of a pastor who introduced this practice to her council. One council member was so agitated, if not irritated, by the practice that she decided to remain in the hallway prior to each meeting. She would not enter until Dwelling was completed. The pastor was astonished that a spiritual leader on the church council would react as forcefully as she had. And yet, this offered the pastor some central learning about her parishoner's own spiritual development; central information for congregational leaders.

A CONCLUDING INVITATION

I have been exploring "hearing to speech" as a central spiritual practice where congregations can participate in the liberating work of

God's own listening to Jesus. I've proposed that "hearing to speech" is situated in a kind of reading of Scripture, Dwelling in the Word, that opens up possibilities for discovering obstacles in our own hearing, while at the same time opening up spaces of shared conversational interaction.

Listening is a central spiritual practice of the congregation, and it deserves time and attention. It also invites a willingness to be disturbed and uncomfortable in order to arrive at a renewed location for where the Spirit is leading in our midst. I invite you to practice Dwelling in your congregation, among your leadership, and to notice what discoveries are brought forth. It is truly a transforming and disruptive practice that cultivates trust and capacities in alignment with the Spirit's leadership among us. There is, as I have seen, rich wisdom and transformation in communal listening that frees congregations for greater imagination and participation in God's preferred and promised future. Will you consider it?

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ENDNOTES

1. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/> (accessed November 21, 2019).
2. To remain faithful to the Spirit's leadership today, any kind of congregational engagement will need to attend more explicitly to the colonizing history of effects that are perpetuated in congregational practice and theory. These introductory remarks is the recognition that I bring my own biases and prejudices to this work, and where, I believe, a kind of approach to listening in the Spirit, offers promise for where it is that the Spirit is calling out new life in congregational leaders. For more explorations on the notion of mastery I refer to above see Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
3. For a more comprehensive view of this practice see Pat Taylor Ellision and Patrick Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations Institute, 2008). For a brief online summary visit <http://www.acoustictheology.com>.
4. For more considerations on the phenomenology of listening see, Aaron Perry, "The Phenomenological Role of Listening in Shaping the Church into a Leading Community," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (2012). Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (NY: Fordham University Press, 2007).
5. Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985).
6. W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). This approach is rooted in Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics, primarily through his understanding of text as the mediating ground where truth and meaning emerges between explanation and understanding. See Paul Ricoeur and John B. Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme Paris, 1981). For a contemporary configuration of Scriptural readings of these sorts see Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literary: Developing Readerly Readers in Teaching Biblical Studies," *Dialog* 53, no. 4 (2014).
7. See Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Lipari says this privileging of the classical Greek *logos* minimizes the relationship of listening, and disregards it; she considers the western *logos* "half formed," for the listening half of the word has been utterly abandoned.
8. See Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another : Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 38.

9. See Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 49ff.

10. Ibid., 156.

11. Ibid., 157.

12. Ibid., 161-62.