

LISTEN TO LOVE

From Rev. John R. White – The First Congregational Church of Dudley, MA – United Church of Christ
(Webster Times reflection for October 6, 2017)

Michael J. Christensen (author, professor, pastor), his wife Rebecca Laird (author, professor, pastor) their two daughters, my wife Sarah, our children (growing to five by March of 1998) and I were neighbors for a time in Summit, New Jersey, during the years I was earning a Master of Divinity Degree from Drew University while working as student, youth leader, student pastor, chaplain and more. These were exhausting yet wonderful and deeply formative years. This family and two other families were, and although many miles separate us now, remain among our dearest friends, always close in heart and mind.

Sometime during the summer of 1997, Michael (who calls me “Brother John,” a man I look up to like an older brother, and yet also a man I feel comfortable going skinny dipping with) and I walked together through the sanctuary of The First Congregational Church of Dudley, United Church of Christ where I had just been hired as pastor. We walked quietly, touching the pulpit (where so many pastors with so much more experience than me had stood) imagining thousands of hours of inspiration and hope being spoken. It was as if we could hear their voices. We walked gently, past the stained glass windows (created in 1890 following a fire which had destroyed the previous building) reflecting on their beauty. It was as if we could hear the sounds of creative workers toiling to construct those windows, walls, community and family. We walked deliberately, to the book at the back of the sanctuary, telling of those who served this church before me.

“Brother Michael” knew me very well. He knew I felt the significance of the moment and was pondering the depth of responsibility I had been given. He knew I was trying to hear everything the walls, pews, windows, pages in the book and everything else surrounding me were trying to communicate to me.

Then he said something I have held onto for these past two decades as a guiding principle for my life as pastor of this church family and indeed my life as pastor within the various communities of these local towns and cities. As best I can remember his exact words, he said: “There is so much history here John. You will need to listen to the voices and stories of those who have walked here and loved here before you. You will need to listen for a long time. Never stop listening. As you listen, you will grow to love them. Don’t try to make any big changes, at least not for a while. For now, simply listen and love them.”

Listening well is a precious gift honored and upheld by all great religious traditions.

“If we have listening ears, God speaks to us in our own language, whatever that language be.” Mahatma Gandhi (Hindu civil rights leader – 1869-1948)

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.” Dalai Lama (representing Buddhist values and traditions to the world)

“The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.” Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist)

“Listen and Silent are spelled with the same letters. Think about it.” (Anonymous)

“Listen to silence. It has so much to say.” Rumi (13th-century Muslim poet and Islamic scholar)

“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” 1 Samuel 3:9 (Hebrew Scriptures - NLT)

“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” James 1:19 (Christian Scriptures - NRSV)

“Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.” Linda Hogan (Native American writer)

On October 5, 1997 I was ordained a United Church of Christ pastor in the sanctuary of the church I still serve. While there have been some big changes in the work of ministry we share, I continue to regard listening well as one of the most important elements of the work I have been called to do in this little corner of the world.

Twenty years into this journey I'm still listening. In our world filled, in my opinion, with too many words, I listen to more than words. I listen to what is being said behind, beneath and beyond the words. I listen for the love. I listen to words of love spoken through tears. I listen to words spoken in anger, often love in disguise. I listen to words shouted, although, I confess, they are often the most difficult words for me to hear. I listen to words spoken quietly and slowly, words formed on the lips of those who have first listened, words filled with thoughtful pauses and I am filled with gratitude for the healing strength and power they convey.

I listen and listen and then, since it is part of what I was hired to do, I write and speak, using words.

Yet, I am so careful then, trying to listen to you listening to me, straining to hear what you will hear. Will you hear the love I intend? I pray it to be so. Thanks for listening. Listen to love. Peace, Pastor John