Lectionary Reflection
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Luke 9:28-36
By Teri McDowell Ott

"You can tell when someone is really listening to you," writes Amanda Ripley in *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out.*

As a journalist, Amanda listens to people for a living. So, she felt confident when she sat down with Gary Friedman to learn about "looping," an active listening technique Gary developed as a conflict mediator.

"I figured I would crush this," Amanda writes, "I had spent much of my life listening to people tell me stories. I always prepared carefully. I nodded and smiled. I furrowed my brow at all the right moments. I was charming!"

"But that is not listening," Gary responded. "Proving you've heard someone is very different from acting like it. People instantly sense the distinction."

Looping is a technique where the listener reflects back to the speaker what the person seemed to have said and checks whether their summary is correct. When Amanda tried it with Gary, she realized how different it felt from her normal way of listening. "Looping forced me to … not think about my next question, or when I could get another cup of coffee. It meant letting the other person lead, and I had to follow, which was a little scary." Checking to see if she'd understood, Amanda was surprised to discover she'd gotten it slightly wrong more often than she would have expected. Then she'd try again and again, listening carefully each time until she got it right.

When Gary and Amanda switched, she experienced what it felt like to really be heard. This technique fundamentally changed how Amanda did her work as a reporter. From then on, she looped people as she interviewed them.

This Sunday's Transfiguration text from Luke rests between passages that reveal how Jesus was not really heard. In Luke 9:22, Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer, be rejected, be killed, and on the third day raised from the dead. The disciples hear these words, but they do not understand. Their misunderstanding is revealed when Peter, eager to please, offers to make three dwellings for the three prophets before him on the mountain: one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. Peter had in mind *Sukkot*, the Jewish feast of tabernacles when all Israelites were to dwell in handmade booths like the fragile shelters the Israelites had in exile, to remind them that God delivered them out of the land of Egypt and to look forward to the coming Messiah. But Jesus had just told his disciples that he was the one they were looking forward to, that he was the fulfillment of Israel's laws and prophecies. The disciples heard these words of Jesus, but they did not understand.

"Listen to him!" God bellows from the mountaintop cloud. Does God sound exasperated to you? "This is my Son, my Chosen." How many different ways do the disciples have to hear this message before they come to understand? What does Jesus have to do or say before we really listen?

My friend Jenny McDevitt, pastor of Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, recently preached a sermon series on "Things Jesus Never Said." Each sermon focused on a phrase mistakenly attributed to Jesus: "Follow Your Heart;" "God Helps Those Who Help Themselves;" "Money is the Root of All Evil;" "God Doesn't Give Us More Than We Can Handle." The series was incredibly popular, Jenny told me, doubling the online viewers of their worship livestream. But her sermon prep turned out to be more difficult than she thought it would be. "When I started looking into these popular phrases, it turned out that there were scriptural references that were very close in meaning, but not quite the same." Jenny had to dig

into the Scriptures, considering not only the words but the context and setting, taking great care to faithfully reflect what Jesus said and meant. Since Jesus himself isn't here to loop, this research and reading is what it takes to listen carefully and faithfully to his words.

Listening well is much harder than we realize. But, as Jenny reminded me this week, it's especially important to put the work into listening to Jesus. Misconceptions and over-simplifications of Jesus' words can lead to theological harm — like people believing that God won't give them more than they can handle in a situation where they have more than they can handle.

"Listen to him!" God bellows from the mountaintop. We, as Christ's disciples, hear these words. But will we do the work of faith to understand?

Questions for reflection:

1. Recall a time when you were trying to communicate something important but didn't feel heard. What did that feel like? What did the other person do (or not do) that made you feel like they weren't listening?
2. Recall a time when you didn't listen well. What were the consequences of failing to listen?
3. In what ways do you currently try to listen to Jesus? What practices could you try to help you listen better?