

Listening to Love

February 3, 2019: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

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[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Psalm 71:1-6](#); [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#); [Luke 4:21-30](#)

Did you hear of the event at the Arab American Museum in Dearborn this past Friday night? It was called "[Freedom Stories](#)" and it was hosted by The Secret Society of Twisted Storytellers, based at the Wright Museum of African American History.

The Secret Society of Twisted Storytellers was founded several years ago by a woman named Satori Shakoor, who started it during the time when she was most acutely grieving the loss of both her mother and her son. It was during this time that Satori, a storyteller by profession and also by lineage--she says, "I come from a long line of storytellers...who could make going to the corner store sound like *The Lord of the Rings!*"--was invited to tell a story at a *Moth* event here in Detroit. When she told her story, people listened to and held her story, and she exclaims, remembering that time, "Being listened to, I felt like anything was possible! I had never been listened to like that." Being listened to, she says, was the beginning of her healing.¹

At that same time, she recognized that our city has been grieving for years, time and again, and she wondered, Might telling our stories - and listening to stories - help our city heal as well? The story, both personally and here in Detroit, is there. "The story," she says, "is there. It is a fact. It is a lived experience. The work," she'll often say, "is connecting to the storyteller."² The work, that is, is listening.

Today we hear the story of when the Word came to Jeremiah, when God put words into Jeremiah's mouth, when the words touched Jeremiah's lips, went into his mouth, down his throat, and into his stomach. Later in the book, in fact, Jeremiah will say that he "eats" the Word of God. I adore Jeremiah. He is visceral, raw, bewildered, and astonished at what God is doing with him. Jeremiah, like all of the prophets and, I would think, like any of us who recognize ourselves in the presence of the Holy, is like, "What? Who, me? What's going on?" And God, to Jeremiah, and to each of us, will say, "Oh, yes, you. I will put my Word within you. Not only will you tell it but you will live it. And it will become love, and it will set you free."

Have you ever felt like a story is in you so viscerally, it's as if you've eaten it? Like it started small, as just a few words strung together, and then it grows and grows and needs to emerge and take its own form in its own space? Satori Shakoor relates to this, saying that, "if you keep [a] story within you, it just festers. It needs air." [Paraphrased:] A story is like a cut on our arm that we put a Band-Aid on for awhile, but at some point, we need to let it air out and heal. When we dare to let a story - a truth that is inside of us - air out, when we dare, she says, to let other "people take a piece of [our] pain, and a piece of [our] joy," these same people can "show [us] what it looks like," can reflect it back to us. Maybe if [we] see that, we "see acceptance. Maybe if [we] see acceptance," we see freedom.³

Freedom, then, is at first an "internal process."⁴ It's going on inside of us, just like words are growing and taking shape inside of us. As I was hearing about this storytelling event at the Arab American

¹ Satori Shakoor, "Listening: A Revolutionary Act", TEDxDetroit, October 6, 2016:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwZjyIT27nk>

² Detroit Today interview, January 31, 2019: <https://wdet.org/posts/2019/01/31/87795-twisted-storytellers-arab-american-national-museum-celebrate-black-history-month-with-freedom-stories/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Museum, I was really moved by the account of one of the storytellers named Shahad Atiya, who was born in Iraq, moved to Detroit, graduated recently from the Wayne State School of Law, and now practices immigration law in Detroit and Dearborn. She has found her way into storytelling, and finds freedom, she says, “not just in the story but in the actual telling of it.” Sounding quite like a prophet, I would say, she says, “It’s me telling the community, ‘I’m saying something and I’m doing something that might make you uncomfortable, but that’s part of the freedom that I’m aspiring to attain.’”⁵

Jeremiah’s call begins as an internal experience, but it does not stop there. God says, “I have put my words in your mouth...over nations and over kingdoms [so that you might] pluck up and pull down, [with these words] might destroy and overthrow, and [with these words] build and plant.” While freedom begins and continues inside of us, it quickly becomes external. Shakoor says freedom is always “a negotiation, in every space and in every way. You don’t just get free [once] and there you go.”⁶

Our call always - our call - just as true to us as it was with Jeremiah - is always to uproot barriers to justice, that is barriers to our own being able to listen and take in another’s truth without tangles of agendas or assumptions or prejudices getting in the way. So that there is room - freedom - for justice to be built and truth to be planted for generations to come.

Here is where those perceived boundaries and barriers, through only the grace of God, can be constructive rather than destructive. Here is where the freedom stories of African Americans speak to the freedom stories of Arab Americans, and vice versa. Because you know when somebody is just like you, or you think that they are just like you, sometimes we think we don’t need to listen as closely. We think, “Oh, yeah, yeah, I know the rest of the story,” and we tune out. This is exactly what Jesus is talking about today. When people say, “Oh, you? You’re Joseph’s son. We’ve watched you grow up. We know everything about you. We’re not going to listen to you.”

He says, “Yes, the truth is, it’s always like this. Elijah, a prophet in Israel, during a time of severe famine, of many widows, when heaven was closed,” he says, “his words were not heard in his home.” Listening is exactly what his people would not do. The only ones who could hear, and be healed by the truth he had to share, were next door, in Syria. Not only with Elijah but also with Elisha: same thing. Lepers, illness, wounding, all over Israel, and “none was healed except Naaman the Syrian.” When we perceive likeness, sometimes listening is exactly what we don’t do.

By the grace of God, listening crosses boundaries. Listening, says Shakoor, “is a revolutionary act,” because we “give up of ourselves” to cross over into another’s world.⁷

Prophecies will end; tongues and speech will cease; but love will not end. Now we know only in part, but then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known since before we were in the womb. Listening, says Shakoor, is the possibility of love,⁸ and love never ends.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Listening: A Revolutionary Act” TEDxDetroit