Chapel Talk: Janet Blank-Libra
September 17, 2012

Deuteronomy 6 4-9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.[a] 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Disclosure

Prayer is like watching
for the kingfisher.
All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear
And wait.
Often, nothing much happens:
There is space, silence
And expectancy.
No visible sign.
Only the Knowledge
That He’s been there
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But sometimes when you’ve almost
Stopped expecting it,
A flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.

Ann Lewin

Debbie Hanson, knowing that I was going to talk about listening today, sent
this poem to me, along with a note, saying that the poem had less to do with
listening than she remembered. But I think she remembered rightly, and that’s why
she passed the poem along. In this poem someone sits and waits and in the waiting
her senses are poised to see and to hear — poised to listen. Though it is her desire
to connect with the kingfisher, she knows the importance of waiting in the quiet. She
knows that into the silence will come something without which silence could not be.
Into the silence will come something with which the one who waits can connect.

We listen, I think, with the whole of ourselves attuned to the message and the
messenger. How else can we fully hear?

My husband is a smart guy. Last summer while kayaking the Cheyenne River
as part of a class dedicated to the study of the environment, he responded to his
environment in a journal entry that he’s given me leave to read to you today.

Through his observations he described the sounds of his journey as the Cheyenne
River Sound Track. He wrote:

“The orchestra consists of numerous members, some more boisterous
than others. The kingbirds are the most consistent in their efforts to
serenade the paddler, but the mourning doves and the killdeers harmonize
and punctuate most every bar of the symphony. There is continuous song all
day long with rare measures of the wind playing solo.

The songs come from hidden locations along the banks, often in the
towering cottonwoods, from the willow thickets, or from the sandbars. Some
brazen individuals sing out as they fly—ensuring their piece of the concerto
is broadcast as far as is possible.

It’s amazing that when we pay attention and tune in to the bird
station, there is constant music.

A good scientist, my husband was more than purely scientific in his
observations; he brought to bear his imagination; he took himself closer through
empathy; he understood the sounds of the Cheyenne River most completely when
he perceived them as art. When we listen in such a way—heart and head engaged—we create relationships. We open the self to possibilities born of the desire to hear as much as is possible. How else is one to understand the whole of any message but through the bringing of the whole self to the hearing? As a listener, Ross became a part of the symphony, attuned to the subtleties, to form, harmony, expression. He heard the individuals and he heard what together they created.

Hear, said Moses. Hear, oh Israel. In my imagination, I hear Moses speak these words with determination and purpose into the silence created by the expectancy of the people. HEAR—he said—hear. Through Moses, the Lord exhorted the people of Israel to take the commandments into themselves and make sense of them, to teach them to their children, to integrate them into their lives. Hear, he said.

Well, studies show that we tend to take in about 25 percent of anything we listen to, so it’s no small wonder we’ve been having trouble following the 10 commandments these past 3000 years or so.

Maybe, I think, we listen too much with our heads and too little with our hearts, which we worry will lead us astray. Studies actually show that we tend to orient ourselves to different ways of listening, some more driven by the heart, some by the head. We split ourselves in two with great regularity; we divide the powers of reason and emotion. Less is heard; less is understood than might otherwise be.

Moses knew that listening meant more than exercising the auditory nerves; such is certainly true for the person whose hearing is impaired. Listening, hearing meant then and means now to take something in deeply. As I imagine myself in that
place, at that time, I imagine that the whole of Moses’ message was framed by further silence as the people took it in, made sense of it. And then what? Lots and lots of conversation, I hope, as people talked things through and listened to each other, filled with expectations, filled with hope, no doubt at times bent out of shape by the whole business of rules and regulations, so seemingly incompatible with their rights as individuals.

The writer and creator of NPR’s radio program *On Being* in her book *Speaking of Faith* calls us to create individually and collectively a discipline of listening. I am struck by her use of the word discipline. To speak of discipline is to speak of the necessity of practice. Here at Augustana we are bound to the liberal arts, to disciplines that are the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, to our exercising and disciplining of mind and heart, spirit and body. We are bound to consider deeply myriad ideas, including the ones that set themselves in opposition to our convictions and our desires.

Whereas Tippett speaks of a discipline of listening, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh practices what he calls deep listening. “Deep listening,” he says, is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give that person a chance to suffer less.” (*Oprah*, March 2010, p. 193) This way of listening, says Nhat Hanh, allows one to recognize the existence of “wrong perceptions” both within the self and within the other. Such
misperceptions, he says, are the foundation for violence.

To listen with purpose. Purpose! How often do I listen with purpose, with the desire to relieve another of suffering? And suffering—how do I define that? I would argue that the person whose voice goes unheard in any conversation suffers. To have purpose is to have a sense of resolve and determination. About what am I resolved? Determined? How often do I listen with purpose—set purpose deliberately into action? What ought my purpose be? Nhat Hanh says it ought to be empathy and compassion. And I agree. When we respond to the other empathetically and compassionately we invite the imagination to see through the eyes of the other. And, yes, in doing so we just might get things wrong. But without the use of the imagination, without the desire to recognize the myriad perspectives through which something can be known, we will limit the questions we ask of the other, the responses we engage, as we seek understanding. Empathy, though, never acts in isolation. It, too, fulfills itself as one part of a larger symphony. It cannot, I think, occur without the presence of two things: respect and authenticity.

If I enter a conversation respectfully, I will have due regard for your thoughts and your feelings. This doesn’t mean I have to agree with you, but it does mean we have the chance of going somewhere constructive.

And authenticity? No one, in my estimation, has defined authenticity—which basically means to be original and genuine—better than did a chili farmer from Arizona I spoke with last year. The authentic person, he said, is the person who, in conversation with another, desires to connect with that individual. This is the person who wants to understand what another person thinks and why, this is the
person who wants to get it right, who wants to know what the meaning of something is for another person. Too often obstacles preclude our hearing what another is saying—or singing in the cottonwoods and the willow thickets. Too often we fail to listen because we are indifferent, tired, preoccupied, or opposed to the other’s point of view. I am guilty of all of the above. Too often, I can’t even manage to take in the requisite 25 percent.

Compassion requires and enforces the need for close listening. One can learn to hear that which is, as the philosopher Alisa Carse puts it, “morally salient.” When we listen to someone, we assign value to that person’s experience, that creature’s experience. How we listen measures the degree of value assigned. If we listen compassionately, hear the full chorus, acknowledge all the parts, we will foster awareness of our interconnectedness and nurture ecological strength, integrity and stability.

No one understood the concept of ecology—the connections between organisms, one to another, and to their environment—better than Aldo Leopold. Born in 1887, Leopold became an author, forester, ecologist, and environmentalist whose life mission was to help humanity understand its place within the biotic community. As an ecologist, he pointed toward what he hoped would be an ecological evolution that would lead humanity away from valuing land as a means for profit and toward valuing it as one part of a larger community to which humanity belonged. We were, he said, ethically obliged to become cognizant of the interdependence of all parts of the environment. Such an orientation would not allow for unbridled objectification of the land. In his landmark work *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold said that the
evolution of a land ethic would be “an intellectual as well as emotional process”
(225). Leopold called humanity to a new level of awareness and responsibility and
respect. He called humanity to find its heart.

I like to think of Augustana College as an ecosystem of sorts (we are a
community of living organisms, though mostly of one species, maybe, and we are in
relationship with a nonliving environment). As an ecosystem we are like no other. It
is the power of love, I think, that has most shaped our life here. But love has its ups
and downs.

Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor, believed that when we fail to listen we reduce
the other to an abstraction. Here at Augie, that way of thinking can quickly turn us
into those administrators, those students, those custodians, those professors, those
security officers. We fit people into categories and think we know what they will say.
In the face of that way of thinking the particularities that make us individuals blow
away with the morning breeze and fail to come to rest as the day grows long. We
choose our way of seeing things over the particulars that come with authentic
conversation, over the possibility that conversation, person to person, face to face,
might yield encouragement. As a community, we are ethically obliged to be
cognizant of the interdependence of all parts of our environment. The ethics by
which we live here must continue to evolve as both an intellectual and emotional
process.

Here on this campus, we witnessed a moment last week that led to
conversation—lots of it, I hear. Members of the community seized the moment to
have clearly needed conversation. I suspect that—as it did for me—Friday’s
Facebook messages—some with an anti-Augie bent—led many of you into contemplative silence as you tried to think about the matter with heart and head engaged. Should we think about Augustana in any other way? I’ve not heard or known much silence since the year began: we dash to our classes, shout to each other, talk to each other, chew through our lunch, listen to our music, play with our phones, snap open our iPads, glue ourselves to our computers. We stay pretty busy, and we stay pretty noisy inside and out. When at our best, though, we connect with our campus community, stretch our minds into the world, take our bodies into the world, interact with and care about individuals and communities beyond ours, even as we live and learn and work and teach and love and think in a geographically defined space of about 100 acres. 100 acres. That’s not so much.

What is an authentic conversation? Can Facebook facilitate such a thing? That’s a big question, and a legitimate one, and I can’t respond to it today, but I will say this. For the past few years I’ve been doing research that has led me to read widely about the role of empathy and compassion in all the disciplines, and I am inclined to think that if and when we focus on our interdependence we focus on the importance of our connectedness; if we focus on our connectedness, we focus on the reality that what we do to one part of Augustana we do to another. As students of the liberal arts – and when I say students I mean all of us – we are obliged to listen. Friday’s Facebook dust-up was a prelude to silence for some of us, an appeal for connection for others, a way to speak out carefully for many, an opportunity to launch an anti-Augie campaign for a few, and an opportunity to proclaim their love for Augie for
others. My head was spinning. If you didn’t see the post, you’re not going to. For better or for worse, it’s gone.

Ever since Paul proposed that Deuteronomy 6:4-9 be today’s message, I’ve been hearing Moses. He commanded his people to hear. He bid them take the Lord’s message to their hearts. He asked them to hear the message in the silence of their lying down and in the moment of their rising up. He saw them giving shape and meaning to the commandments in the work of their hands and their heads. He saw that the message would be integral to their whole of their lives — the doorframes through which they would enter and leave the safety of home; the gates that would close behind them as they chose the comfort of familiarity or open before them as they chose to know the depth and breadth of all the world. I don’t know much but I think I do know this: We are called to love and to do so with all our soul and all our strength. What is one called to hear in a moment of discontent? For what ought we listen? How would he have us listen to each other? How have we been—or have we been—listening to each other? How can one cultivate a campus-wide discipline of listening? I do believe we owe Moses some answers. On any given day at Augustana we ought to be poised for the moment within which we will connect and become, therefore, more than we were the very second before.

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MORNING WORSHIP
Monday, September 17, 2012

Prelude
“Jubilate” Roy Douglas

Welcome/announcements

Invocation
L: God you call us to love you with our minds,
C: Help our study be faithful.
L: God, you call us to love you with our souls
C: Open us to all disciplines, questions, and lenses for study.
L: God, you called us and your whole creation good
C: Propel us to your goodness.
L: God, you call us to love our neighbors as ourselves.
C: Bend us in service, one of another.
L: God, you call us to be one.
C: In all things make us your community, make us Yours.

Hymn
“Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness” ELW #396 vv. 1-2

Scripture
Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Sermon
Janet Blank-Libra, Dept of English
Chair of Moral Values

Hymn
“Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness” ELW #396 v. 3

Prayers

Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude
“Postlude” William Mathias

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Chapel Worship, MWF 10 AM, Sundays at 11, Tuesdays at 9 pm
(Common Ground)

Catholic Mass: Sundays 8 PM, First Tuesday of each month at 10 am

Outreach: Youth teams travel to lead lock ins; Worship teams travel to lead
Sunday Worship services at congregations in the region. Teams meet weekly
and travel monthly. Outreach teams are great cells of support and
involvement. Ice cream social is TUESDAY- details below!!

Ice cream social - Augustana Outreach Ministries will be hosting an
ice cream social in each of the four residence halls (Bergsaker,
Solberg, Granskou, Stavig) on Tuesday, September 18th from 5:30-
6:30pm. Stop by to enjoy a delicious treat and learn about the amazing
opportunities Augustana Outreach has to offer.

Are you signed up for an Outreach Team? Don’t miss the Outreach
Kick-Off Event at Our Savior's Lutheran Church (across the
street from Augie) this Friday, September 21, 5-9pm. The pizza
will be free and the fun will be fabulous! Outreach members, please
make this event a priority in your week and make every effort to
attend. Bring a friend or two!!!!

Fall Break trip to Pine Ridge: meet our neighbors, serve children, discover
Gospel engaging injustice as we listen and learn from friends in Pine Ridge.
Cost is $100; sign up in the chapel office.

Service learning travel: Campus Ministry will sponsor a Fall Break trip to
Pine Ridge and Spring break trips to Florida to help renovate a camp or to
Spain where we will walk the Camino de Santiago! Inquire in the chapel
office for details.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Tuesday, 9/18
Koinonia, 10 am - (those interested in church vocations), meet in the chapel narthex
- Ice cream socials in the dorms - 5:30-6:30 pm

Wednesday, 9/19
Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Paul.; Sp. Music - Augie Choir

Friday, 9/21
Worship, 10 am - Michael Seeley, Chapel Pres.

Sunday, 9/23
Worship, 11 am - Dan Bock, ’12
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