

“A Hidden Wholeness: Learning to Speak and Listen”  
James 1:19

One of the leadership skills I and the leaders of this church have learned through the years is trying to figure out if a problem or an issue we are dealing with is technical, strategic, or adaptive/transformational in its nature. Here is a video clip explaining some of the differences between technical and adaptive challenges:

[https://youtu.be/Lq31Zt2\\_iUA](https://youtu.be/Lq31Zt2_iUA)

Here is a list from Harvard Medical School about some of the markers to look for:

**Technical Challenges:**

- The problem is known, easy to identify and often recognizable based on experience
- Similarly, the solution is known based on experience and expertise
- The locus of responsibility is with experts and authorities
- Obstacles are usually resource-limited, i.e., time and money

**Adaptive Challenges:**

- The problem is often unknown or hard to identify; tied to deeper patterns or dynamics and requires learning
- The solution is unknown, which again requires learning
- Responsibility is with those affected by the challenge (stakeholders), including authorities
- The obstacles are less tangible - hearts and minds, values, loyalties and relationships

Let's take an example from real life. If your washing machine breaks down, you don't need to sit there and analyze the problem. What you need is someone to come in and fix it or just go buy a new machine. The solution is clear and simple and so is the problem. But if an organization is having trouble retaining talent, there is probably an adaptive challenge there. On a personal level, if you keep bumping up against the same patterns in your life, there is usually a deeper issue at work.

The problem comes to us when we try to treat every issue as a technical issue and thus try to fix things that need to be just acknowledged and wrestled with. We try to fix others and give advice thinking that the solution is technical. This is the wisdom which Parker Palmer shares in his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, about dealing with the deeper stuff of life. He notes that, “the deeper your issue goes, the less likely it is that my advice will be of any real value. I may know how to fix your car or help you write a paper, but I do not know how to salvage your failing career, repair your broken marriage, or save you from despair...In the face of our deepest questions... our habit of advising each other reveals its shadow side. If the shadow could speak its logic, I think it would say something like this: ‘If you take my advice, you will surely solve your problem. If you take my advice but fail to solve your problem, you did not try hard enough. If you fail to take my advice, I did the best I could. So I am covered.’...If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows

what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods.”

This is the same advice that the author of James gives to the followers of Jesus. Let's listen to James 1:19: “You must understand this, my beloved:<sup>[a]</sup> let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;”

James is a collection of teachings about the way Christians should live and behave. It is concerned with practical Christianity, with “walking the walk” and not just “talking the talk.” Faith is not just about personal piety or doing good deeds in private life. To James, the church exists to change the world. The indication that one's faith is real is action and not just speech. Anybody can talk about Jesus. But true discipleship comes from action. This action is specifically about helping those who are most needy in society or as James puts it, “care for orphans and widows in their distress.”

The first step to helping anyone is listening. Being quick to listen and slow to speak is seen as key to serving others. This whole section of this chapter is about actions that serve and help others. Putting our faith into action is essential to the writer of this letter. His advice to the community is that “faith without works is dead.” And the first act of faith is to listen to others. Listening is the beginning of a relationship. If we read any of the Gospels and the stories about Jesus' life, we learn about his willingness to listen to others and to let them speak their truth, even if it contradicted his point of view. One of my favorite stories is that of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman who challenged Jesus to help her daughter. Let's listen to a part of their dialogue according to Mark 7: 27-30

<sup>27</sup> He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.’ <sup>28</sup> But she answered him, ‘Sir,<sup>[b]</sup> even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.’ <sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ <sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

He allowed the conversation to change his mind. Listening to the woman with openness changed things for Jesus.

So how do we listen to someone else's soul? The answer is pretty simple. Just listen! We sometimes feel the need to be brilliant at analyzing the situation or asking good questions. We may even feel the need to tell someone about our own experiences or to tell them how to handle the situation. While this might be appropriate if the issue is technical, it is not appropriate when it comes to deeper struggles. The invitation is to listen and hold the space with intention and integrity. We don't have to necessarily agree with or even understand everything that is being said. Our role is to hold the space for the soul of the other person to speak.

In addition to the rule of “no fixing or advising,” Parker Palmer suggests a few helpful practices:

- Allowing brief, reflective silence to fall between words.
- Responding to the speaker not with commentary but honest, open questions that have no other intent than to help the speaker hear more deeply whatever he or she is saying.
- Honoring whatever truth-telling has been done by speaking one's own truth opening in the center of the circle.

Henri Nouwen writes: "To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept."

We will end with a blessing from Jan Richardson:

### **Blessing to Open the Ear**

That as we wake  
we will listen.

That as we rise  
we will listen.

That before our first words  
of the day  
we will listen.

That when we meet  
we will listen.

That at noontime  
we will listen.

That at dusk  
we will listen.

That at the gathering  
of night  
we will listen.

That entering sleep  
we will listen still.

Amen.