



LOVING *through* LISTENING

An 8-Day Reading Plan

by the Zoweh Women's Team



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What if listening is the kindest, most honoring way to love someone? One of the most remarkable skills anyone can ever practice, listening is creating an environment in which another person feels heard, understood, known, cared for ... loved. Through these eight days, we invite you to consider the value and the impact of listening well, and how cultivating and practicing listening brings healing and integration.

1. Why Does Listening Well Matter?

*A wise person will listen and continue to learn,
and an understanding person will gain direction.*

Proverbs 1:5 GW

Understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters. Let everyone be quick to hear [be a careful, thoughtful listener], slow to speak [a speaker of carefully chosen words and], slow to anger [patient, reflective, forgiving].

James 1:19 AMP

Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Matthew 22:37-39 NIV

If loving each other is as important and significant to God as Jesus says in Matthew 22:37-39, the question that comes to mind is what are ways to love each other well? One of the ways Jesus loves us and invites us to love is through listening. The practice of listening well is loving, honoring, and healing.

What if listening is not merely the act of hearing the words spoken? What if listening is the practice/art of understanding the meaning behind the words? Listening is being attuned to a person's heart and experience – joining them in their story, weeping as they weep, sharing their joy, and everything in between. One of the most remarkable skills anyone can ever practice, listening is creating environments in which the other person feels heard, understood, known, cared for ... loved.

We each have a story to be told that is worthy of good, wise, and kind engagement. Your story matters, and is worthy of being heard, held, and engaged well, with kindness and attunement.

Attunement is about understanding another's inner emotional world. The window into another's emotional world is their non-verbal communication—that is, their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language.

Telling our stories to someone who listens with compassion and empathy contributes to redeeming painful, fragmented experiences and developing new, healthy, and whole stories – regardless of what a person has experienced. When we tell our stories, including the fullness of brokenness and blessing, pain and joy – to a caring person, it leads to a kind and empathic understanding of others AND ourselves, interrupting entrenched,

unhealthy, harmful patterns. How kind of God to bring healing and integration to his beloved this way!

As we listen, we have the opportunity to offer a safe and welcoming space for one who is struggling, stuck, hurting, and who is courageous enough to share her/his story. We get to come alongside her, listen well as she shares, and invite Jesus to meet her here in this time and in this space. This is a sacred space. Holy ground.

This is the invitation of listening: we have the opportunity to partner with Trinity: Abba Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit for the hearts of others – to offer care and compassion in ways that may bring integration and healing!

God's loving presence within us — in and through your presence — is how the Kingdom comes here on earth. This is the place where Love rises in you and through you. May it be so!

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, how have I experienced this to be true for me? How have I experienced being listened to and attuned to? How am I meant to love and be loved through listening well and showing honor and care for others?

Jesus, how might it feel if my story is held and engaged well? Please give me a glimpse of this.

Spirit, how are you with and in my every breath, every thought and hope and care? How are you aware and attuned to my heart and my story?

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2. Helpful Listening and Responding

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:35 NIV

Finally, all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude.

1 Peter 3:8 NLT

The first duty of love is to listen.

Paul Tillich

Can you think of a time when someone sat with you face to face, leaned in, and listened intently as you shared a story with them of when you were hurt, betrayed or abandoned in some way? Or perhaps you felt stuck or overwhelmed. What was that like for you? What did it feel like when they listened and engaged you well? What did it invite in you?

We embody the love and the heart of God, the hands and feet of Jesus when we are present to each other and offer attuned care. In 1 Peter 3:8, we are invited to compassion, kindness, and humility as we offer our presence in Love.

What does this look like on a practical level when we are sitting face to face with someone who begins to share their story and heart?

Intentional, helpful listening is:

- Keeping your mind and heart open and curious.
- Holding the space for them for that time period and giving them my undivided attention.
- Being fully present. When you are fully present and engaged, you communicate, "You are important, and so are the things you are saying. I hear you. I see you. I care about you and your story. It matters."
- Engaging them - their whole person - with your whole person. Allowing them to affect you, i.e., to grieve with those who grieve.
- Offering them the dignity of being heard—having their story witnessed.

We each have different styles of relating, and yet there are ways we can be with another person that show care, honor, kindness, and compassion in ways that have the potential to facilitate healing!

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, how am I meant to be cared for, attuned to, and listened to in ways that bring honor, dignity, integration, and healing to the deep places of my heart and in my story? Where are your provisions for me here?

Jesus, would you help me remember how it felt when someone listened well to my heart and my story? How did I feel in my body as they listened to me? What did their listening invite in me?

Spirit, would you open my heart and mind to the possible ways that your Presence brings integration and healing and how I might partner with you to offer this to others?

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3. Your Presence Matters

*Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness
in honoring one another.*

Romans 12:10 NET

*For He has not turned away from the suffering of the one in pain or trouble. He has not
hidden His face from him. But He has heard his cry for help.*

Psalm 22:2 NLV

But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.

Psalm 3:3 ESV

In Psalm 3:3 David cries out to God asking him to be a shield and a “lifter of my head.” This lifting is a gift you can offer. Essentially your way of being present says to them that you will not join the ranks of anyone who shames them for being “too much” or “not enough” or for “being too out of step morally”, and so on. You are there to lift their downcast eyes to a loving gaze that forgives and welcomes the weak and the wounded back home. Brené Brown said,

“One of the most valuable gifts in my life was from my mom. She taught us to never look away from pain. The lesson was simple and clear:

- Don’t look away. Don’t look down. Don’t pretend not to see hurt.
- Look people in the eye. Even when their pain is overwhelming.
- And when you’re hurting and in pain, find people who can look you in the eye.
- We need to know we’re not alone—especially when we’re hurting.”

We ALL experience seasons of pain and suffering, and we experience seasons of being able to offer comfort and care. Both thread through our individual stories. This is not their first or their last difficult season, but it is part of their growth and maturity. In a sense, it helps to convey, “You are right on time, and this is familiar to Jesus—He is well acquainted with grief.”

What an opportunity to see, hear, honor, and engage another, as people on the same path, in the middle of a journey, meeting in a sacred moment arranged for by God for his purposes in two lives!

Henri Nouwen speaks to this connective togetherness brilliantly and beautifully:

“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, show me when you have been the God of all comfort in my story; when you or someone else has lifted my head while I was lonely, feeling overwhelmed, heartbroken, or grieving.

Jesus, when I've shared my story, how has my heart been handled?

Holy Spirit, help me to name the hurting places in my heart and story. Comforter, tend to these hurting places, and bring your healing balm.

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4. Unhelpful Listening and Responding

Answering before listening is both stupid and rude..

Proverbs 18:13 MSG

Understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters. Let everyone be quick to hear [be a careful, thoughtful listener], slow to speak [a speaker of carefully chosen words and], slow to anger [patient, reflective, forgiving].

James 1:19 AMP

I recently shared with a small group of friends about a very painful encounter I had just had with a family member during our family's vacation at the beach. One friend asked, "When did that happen?"

I said, "It was day five of our week."

He said with a nervous laugh, "Well, at least you had five good days!"

That comment was not only unhelpful, it was also very insensitive, unkind, dismissive of my pain, and actually felt like more of the harm I had just endured from my family member. Sometimes, despite our heart to offer care, we venture into some ways of engaging and listening that are simply not helpful, and could even be harmful. Here are a few examples:*

The Bulldozer offers insight into someone's story; but instead of moving with compassion and wisdom, Bulldozers barge into painful territory without having been invited there. The sharer will likely feel afraid.

The Advice Giver avoids entering into their story, and instead attempts to tend to a person's heart by offering practical advice such as "read this book," or "take this class." There is certainly a time and place for offering helpful things, but this can often be a way of sidestepping care. The sharer will likely feel dismissed.

The Story Diverter/Co-Opter assumes her own story is the best guide to understanding someone else's, and co-opts the time by shifting attention to her own story as a means of offering help. It leaves the person who is sharing feeling burdened to offer care while also feeling frustrated and abandoned.

The Interrogator asks multiple questions, assuming they are easily answered or that the person hasn't considered them. This refusal to enter into their story heaps heavy burdens on an already burdened person.

The Poker Face offers very little response in both verbal and non-verbal communication, thus is essentially silent. This reaction often comes from a place of being unsure of what to do and not wanting to cause harm, but it leaves the person sharing alone, afraid, and likely ashamed.

If you catch yourself responding in one of the ways listed above, it's okay! Don't panic! You might default into one of these unhelpful ways as you learn and practice listening and engaging well. There is grace for each of us as we grow in offering good care. If you do find that you've defaulted into one of these unhelpful ways of listening, stop, name it, apologize, and then re-engage with kindness and attunement.

**adapted from The Allender Center's Story Sage*

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, please remind me of a time when I shared with someone who did not listen well. Would you help me remember what that felt like? What did it raise up in me?

Jesus, would you help me to see where I react in some of these unhelpful ways of listening? What might be the cause for why I relate as I currently do?

Spirit, where do I need to extend grace to myself for the ways I have not listened as well as I might have?

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5. Bear With Me

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Ephesians 4:2 NIV

Be kind and compassionate to one another.

Ephesians 4:32 NIV

Rejoice with those who rejoice [sharing others' joy], and weep with those who weep [sharing others' grief].

Romans 12:15 AMP

One evening I was in a small group, and we were checking in with each other before we started discussing the book we were reading together. One of the women (Momma #1) vulnerably shared that her teenage son was struggling with depression, and she feared he was suicidal. Through her tears, she shared that she was at such a loss. She felt helpless and scared.

Without pause, one of the women in the group (Momma #2) jumped in and said, "I know exactly how you feel! That happened to our son! He ... we ... It was awful!"

The momentum and focus shifted from the hurting Momma #1 to Momma #2 and her story. I sat stunned in my seat. What happened next brought tears to my eyes. The brokenhearted momma said, "I'm so sorry for your pain!"

Do you see what happened here? Momma #2 was trying to be kind. She was also likely uncomfortable with the discomfort of the hurting momma. Momma #2 unknowingly hijacked Momma #1's pain and made it about herself, missing an opportunity to join her in her ache, and perhaps ask a question or two that might help her stay in the story, and care for her just by being with her in it.

Often in these moments we throw Scripture and cliches at those who are hurting. Or we offer, "I'll pray for you," and we move on to the next thing. This shuts the conversation down. It closes the door on an opportunity to join them where they are and engage them in a way that can actually offer some healing balm. When we offer verses or cliches initially, we may be attempting to help or to make things "better", when actually, we are often trying to make ourselves feel better, as we are often uncomfortable with others' emotions, struggle, and pain. We want to rescue, when what they are really crying out for is for their struggle and pain to be witnessed and joined with.

Sometimes we don't know how to respond, and yet, what might feel most helpful in the moment is to hear,

"I don't even know what to say. I'm just so glad you told me."

It is an honor to bear witness to another human being's story—especially those of pain, sorrow, and heartache. To hold space for their story, their pain, and to bear their burden with them—if only for a few moments—can be an incredible gift.

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, what are your intentions for how we handle each other's hearts and stories with care, kindness, and compassion?

Jesus, how have you been present with me in my story, in my struggle? How might I be with others similarly in theirs?

Spirit, how do you bear witness to my situation, my story, my pain, to my grief? How might I bear witness to others in theirs?

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6. Asking Meaningful Questions

Jesus asked, 'What do you think about this?'

Matthew 18:12 NLV

Jesus asked, 'Why are you afraid?'

Matthew 8:26 NLT

Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, 'Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?'

Luke 5:22 NIV

O Lord, you have heard the desire of the humble [and oppressed]; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to hear. [you listen to their cry] Psalm 10:17.

Psalm 10:17 AMP/NIV

Learning how to ask good questions is paramount in listening well. Good questions—those that are thoughtful, short, respectful, pertinent, and open-ended (open-ended questions cannot be answered with 'Yes' or 'No')—invite thoughtful responses, stories, and opportunities to express how the person is feeling. Leading questions, judgmental questions, questions that suggest a solution, and the "Why?" questions can shut down conversation, causing the person sharing to retreat. It is also important that questions not be shot off rapid fire. Give them time to consider and explore one question before asking another, listening well to their responses. Be curious and give time for them to ponder your questions.

Examples of Good Questions:

- Can you put words to the tears that are starting to come?
- What about his/her words feel true or have some power for you? What sticks?
- Do you want to say more about that? (about the anxiety, the rejection, the betrayal)
- What are you doing with the hurt? It's so hard to contend with the hurt.
- How are you making sense of that accident, betrayal, situation?
- I wonder if you are able to allow yourself to be angry at what was done, what happened to you? I feel angry with you, on your behalf.
- Where are you bracing? (your gut? teeth clenched? shoulders tight?)
- How are you feeling in your body right now?

If there is any confusion or doubt about what you are hearing (especially if you sense that it's important), take the opportunity to clarify. Ask her if you may repeat what you think you heard, so that she can confirm that you heard correctly. Try to "mirror" what she said. This kind of active listening is very valuable.

Jesus is our ultimate example. He asked over 300 simple and brilliant questions in the gospels, engaging with individuals of all walks of life. He often stopped what he was doing to offer care to hurting people, and embraced their interruptions. I wish I could have witnessed his body language and the love he showed as he conversed with ordinary people around him. I wonder how he bore witness to their stories of pain as well as their joys. Here are a few of the questions Jesus is recorded asking:

What do you want me to do for you? (Matthew 20:32, Mark 10:36, 51 Luke 18:41, John 1:38 NIV)

Why are you afraid? (Matthew 8:26 NLT)

Do you believe that I am able to do this? (Matthew 9:28 NIV)

Our prayer is that all of this will help you to move in union with God as Jesus did, so that when listening, you may see an entry point into someone's story when appropriate, asking questions, allowing for a deeper level of engagement with the person sitting next to you.

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, when have I experienced the value of asking good, wise, kind, thoughtful questions?

Jesus, when have I experienced being asked good questions, in ways that invite deeper consideration, exploration, and connection?

Spirit, when have I been engaged with curiosity and without judgment in my story? Please help me and guide me in how to be curious and open without judgment as I listen to others. May my being present to your Presence bring wisdom in the moment to know when to ask and engage, when a pause is needed, and when to sit quietly.

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7. The Importance of Naming

But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.

Psalm 10:14 NIV

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15 NASB

Love one another deeply, from the heart.

1 Peter 1:22 NIV

Quite possibly the kindest and most helpful thing you can do for someone is to name for them what you have just heard and witnessed as they've shared with you. I remember when I shared a painful story with someone and they simply said, "That is so hard." I felt heard and joined in my sadness, and that they were feeling along with me (empathy).

Here are a few examples of what you've heard:

- I hear how heartbreaking and painful that must be. It sounds really lonely.
- Your body has been feeling and carrying a lot.
- That sounds devastating.
- You have endured much _____ (heartache, stress, uncertainty, loneliness, being left out, pain, sorrow, loss, waiting...).

Responses like these help us stay with them in their story and invite more!

When something is accurately named, the body already knows it. (This is how attunement works.) So it can feel like a relief and a kindness to have someone else bear witness to what you know is true, but might not be able to put words to. Sometimes it's a willingness to name hard things.

- It sounds as if you've had to make yourself small.
- I hear such loneliness. (and I feel sad for that little girl/boy.)
- There was so little care for you.

Naming it sometimes invites the person to feel what they weren't allowed to feel in the midst of the situation, opening the door for it to be grieved, which can bring significant healing. Naming the themes of what you are hearing in their story can bring clarity and

perspective, stripping it of its power.

- I hear a lot of pain (fear, loneliness, etc.) in your story.
- It sounds like you weren't allowed to be angry (sad, disappointed, happy, etc.)
- It seems like you have been trained to hold all of that inside.
- It sounds like it is hard for you to allow yourself to be seen and to receive care. And I hear the loneliness in that.
- Have you been able to name that this was abuse (or betrayal, abandonment, neglect, assault, diminishment, a bind)?

When we courageously and kindly name something we see in someone and in their story, we offer them a gift of joining them right where they are and shining a light in the darkness. Naming honors hearts, minds, souls, and bodies as they have endured much. It gives words to what may have gone unnamed, unacknowledged, untended, uncared for, ungrieved, and unhealed.

To offer this way of listening and naming, without judgment or blame, is a practice and skill that can be developed as we seek to care well for others. I have experienced how healing it feels to have someone name what they witness in my story. In those moments, I have felt less alone.

We were created to care for the people around us this way. May an awareness of the significance of naming help you to cultivate the practice of naming what see and hear in others' stories that might help bring deeper clarity, understanding, and healing. And as you grow in discerning when and how to name things you hear and see in another's story, may that help them explore, discover, uncover, and untangle things that may shed light on what they've experienced, inviting healing, freedom, and life.

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, where in my story has someone named something for me that they've seen in my story?

Jesus, when someone has named something for me, with curiosity and without judgment, how did it feel for me?

Spirit, show me where naming something in my story has brought deeper clarity, understanding, and healing.

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8. Silence is Golden

Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Job 2:13 NIV

Understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters. Let everyone be quick to hear [be a careful, thoughtful listener], slow to speak [a speaker of carefully chosen words and], slow to anger [patient, reflective, forgiving].

James 1:19 AMP

If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit as well.

Galatians 5:25 NASB

How do you feel when there is silence in a conversation? Does it feel awkward or uncomfortable? Do you feel a need to fill it with words and conversation? This might be something to be curious about in your own story.

Pay attention to moments when you might be feeling the need to say something because the silence feels awkward, or you want to rescue the other (and yourself!). The person you are sitting with may need a few minutes of silence to process their thoughts and feelings. They may not be used to being attuned to and listened to this way, and it might take some time to adjust to it.

What if we learn to be okay with silence?

May we be attuned to the Spirit in each moment, knowing what is needed and what is not. Take this time of quiet in conversation to also check in with yourself and the Spirit: Where are you feeling their story in your body? What emotions come up? Pictures? Words?

May we be asking even as we breathe: What does this person need right now, Spirit of God?

Spirit of God, would you bring me to a place where I am settled enough to be comfortable sitting in the silence.

In this final day of our *Loving through Listening Reading Plan*, let's recap the big ideas:

- When we listen and attune well, we create an environment for healing, extending the loving presence of God to those with whom we are in conversation.

- Our stories and emotions matter, to each of us, and to God.
- When we bear witness to each other's stories, we each feel less alone.
- The very ways we are accustomed to responding and used to think most helpful in listening can actually be harmful and isolating: drawing attention to our own story as it relates to theirs, bulldozing recklessly, offering advice and bible verses, with quick promises to pray for them. Often these are attempts to feel less uncomfortable with their pain and move on from what feels difficult to sit with. This can impair their journey toward healing and restoration!
- Asking open-ended questions allows the person to stay in their story and feel seen, known, and cared for well.
- Listening and naming what you observe in their story offers a mirror for the person to see their story with fresh eyes, and permission to feel now what they couldn't then.
- Leaning into the silence in the conversation rather than shying away from it creates space for engagement. In those moments, as the Spirit to guide both of your hearts and words as you continue.

As you ponder this with God today, ask Him ...

Father, what is my relationship with Silence? How do I feel in the silence?

Jesus, will you reveal to me why I may struggle with silence? Where does it come from? What is the source of the discomfort or fear of silence for me?

Spirit, I invite you to awaken me to moments in my story where silence was not welcomed? Where it was avoided, and Why? Help me be curious about the discomfort silence might bring for me.

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