

# **The Theology of Listening**

Sara Korber-DeWeerd

Some of us are better at listening than others. My youngest child, who has Down syndrome, often finds himself in the position of listener. He needs extra help learning new skills, so he listens for guidance. It takes him more time to process language, so he listens to understand. It takes him longer to formulate speech, and sometimes conversations move on before he can add his thoughts. His family, teachers, friends, and classmates have to slow down in order to really know what he thinks. They have to listen.

## **The Privilege of Being Heard**

Until I began navigating the challenges of communication with my son, I never thought of the ability to be heard as a privilege, a luxury available to some but not others. As a quiet child, I often chose not to speak, because it made me uncomfortable; I didn't enjoy the attention. Being an introvert made me a careful observer of people. I learned a lot by listening—about others' differences and beliefs, about their strengths and challenges. But I've rarely been forced into that listening position.

Sometimes when he feels left out, my son grows frustrated. Having been ignored for too long, he inserts himself into conversations at his breaking point. His yelling or aggression is met with our reminders to be patient, but I often wonder how long he was waiting before we finally heard him.

In the political arena, even our churches, it sometimes seems as if everyone is talking, but no one is listening. I think of my son and the way he has always been compelled to listen, to hang on the margins of a conversation. Perhaps we can learn from those who are compelled to listen with forced regularity.

Slowing down to listen to my son and to my daughters has reminded me of the listening posture I was comfortable assuming as a child. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual, non-disabled woman whose many privileges are unearned, I now recognize the benefit of choosing silence more often—not out of discomfort or fear, but out of a need to understand. Life with my son has also taught me there are many reasons for silence; whether chosen or forced, it does not mean that those who don't speak or are not heard have nothing meaningful to offer. Imagine if we began listening to the silences themselves. Who is not present? Who has not felt welcome? What would it require of us to invite new voices?

## **From Tolerance to Listening**

In today's information-saturated climate, we're inundated with others' convictions and opinions. We're expected to be tolerant of differences and asked to keep any "narrow" views to ourselves. Yet I am consistently shocked by the intolerance of a mainstream culture that prides itself on tolerance. What happens, then, when tolerance begins to look like intolerance? Tolerance no

longer serves when it demands my quiet acceptance that division or injustice “is just the way things are.” Is there a third way?

It’s time to shift the cultural focus on absolute tolerance to a more complex focus on listening. Tolerance and listening are not the same thing. Tolerance demands we abide by the rhetoric of the day, no matter how offensive. But listening, though it often requires our own silence, is always active and always engaged. We lay down our personal agenda; we silence long-held convictions not to avoid offending, but instead to understand. And maybe after we listen, we ask questions. Maybe we invite respectful dialogue, with the goal of seeing God in us—*imago Dei*.

People have often commented that our son is especially kind and emotionally intuitive, that he can read the feelings in a room with incredible and compassionate accuracy. I wonder if the practice of forced listening has equipped him with these superpowers, ones that individuals with Down syndrome are often said to possess. I’m not a fan of stereotypes that label individuals with disabilities; even positive labels have the power to subsume personal identity. But what if emotional intuition and interpersonal skills are not a stereotype, but a gift that some possess and grow by practiced repetition, a gift that has been cultivated, whether voluntarily or not?

### **Listening as an Act of Love**

Listening is not dangerous; it will not subject the listener to unwitting conversion—perhaps convictions will remain unchanged; perhaps they shouldn’t. Listening does not lead to division beyond reconciliation; it is, in fact, the first step toward it, because listening is an act of love.

Imagine if when marginalized people groups spoke in the church to identify it as a historical place of oppression, coerced silence, and abuse, rather than quickly coming to our own defense or, worse, not responding at all, we said, “Tell us more.” These three simple words invite dialogue, and they make us ready to listen. These are the words my husband and I have been taught to use by speech therapists when our son produces an utterance that is too short to make his meaning clear but we know he wants his words to mean more. “Tell us more” is an invitation for him to try again, but it is also a signal that we, his family, are prepared to wait and to listen—that we want to understand....

### **Finding Common Ground**

If we believe what Genesis tells us, that we are created in God’s image, then our common ground is not our opinions but each other. So if I am an image bearer and you are, too, what can we offer one another? How do we need each other? What shred of holiness is in us that we might bring it to bear even on our disagreements?

When we recognize that our shared humanity is rooted in our shared Creator, we don’t need to agree to find common ground. Listening can help us navigate hot-button topics that have the power to divide—topics such as sexuality, abuse, discrimination, racism, and injustice. When we quiet the noise of competing ideologies, then we can listen. When we listen, then we can understand. When we understand and repent, then we can act. I see now that there are many steps

to take before action. But too often, we leap before we look, we speak before we hear. In such a noisy world, perhaps a theology of listening is long overdue.

### **About the Author**

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