An Ecclesial Ethics of Attentive Listening:
What might this include and mean for a vigilant and vulnerable Church?
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This presentation is in three parts. First, I want to underline how embodied listening is by offering two vignettes of personal experiences of listening that highlight how embodied listening is. Second, I turn to my favorite biblical pericope, the Man born Blind, in John 9 as a foundational model for an ecclesial ethic of listening. Third, I suggest a variety of points for us to expand on vulnerability and recognition both personally and collectively on an ethics of listening. Each of these parts helps develop our ecclesial ethics of attentive listening. For the first part, by emphasizing voice in its texture and timbre, we can report on listening in a much more embodied relationality that I think furthers the importance of listening itself. By the second, we see how scripture upholds how listening is a constitutive part of discipleship. In fact, I think we can say that one cannot be a disciple, if one cannot listen. Third, through looking at the capacity for vulnerability and the practice of recognition I try to outline more expansively the normative tasks found within an ecclesial ethics of listening.

Two Vignettes on Voice

In the Symposium on Listening for a vigilant and vulnerable church, I was struck by the need to practice what Dr. Anna Abram proposed regarding listening and the moral imagination. Here I want to suggest that in reporting on narratives of listening, we might want to emphasize not only how *we* listened, but also the voice of the one who spoke. Listening can just be a recollection of what's in our head. But if we emphasize the voice and its texture and timbre we report on listening in a much more embodied relationality that I think furthers the importance of listening itself.

In 1991, my dad, Francis A. Keenan, suffered a heart attack as he was helping my brother and his wife move in to their new home in southern Florida. Unfortunately between the moment he had his heart attack and the time the emergency medics secured a pulse from him, more than 26 minutes had passed and my father died seven days later, never having regained consciousness. My mom and dad had just moved to Florida and were living in a rental waiting for their condo to be completed.

They had an answering machine that each time it answered you would hear my dad's voice, "Dolores and I are away from the phone, please leave a message at the sound of the beep." After his heart attack, we kept the message there on the machine despite my father's condition, hoping he would one day be restored to health. But when he died we decided that too many people would mistakenly think Dad was surviving. Not even thinking that there could have been a way with the answering machine that we could have saved the message, I remember we simply decided to erase the message and as soon as we did, we realized our mistake: we would never hear his voice again, the timbre and texture of his voice. Even to this day more than thirty-one years later, that is a voice I would love to hear. Imagine, I ask you, what it's like to lose the

voice of one you love. Imagine our mistake; imagine how a voice literally touches the heart, mind and soul. Imagine the voices of the people you listen too. Consider how embodied the voice is, like a fingerprint in its uniqueness, like a blueprint that tells a whole story.

The second is that I remembered a phone call I received some 22 years ago from a psychotherapist. I did not know the caller. He introduced himself saying that he worked with some clients who were struggling to understand what their actual gender was. These were people wondering and, in some instances, coming to terms with the possibility that their gender was not what they were assigned at birth. Then he told me why he was calling me.

A few of his clients were Catholic and several of them said they would like to talk with a priest. He mentioned it was not confession they were seeking; they just wanted to talk with a priest. Then he added, "I am sure you can understand that in light of everything that my clients have been through, I am afraid that a priest could actually set them back a bit, if he decided not to listen but to tell them that they shouldn't be asking the questions that they are. So, I asked many of my colleagues here in Boston for a recommendation and your name was the one they each suggested as a priest who would listen. Could I refer you to my clients who want to meet a priest?"

I answered that I was sure there were plenty of other Boston-area priests who would listen, but that I would.

I will not say anything about the conversations, not because they were confessional, which they were not, but because they were confidential. I will say, however, they were transformative for me. I never heard such narratives. More than anything I realized how extraordinary their experiences were. These experiences were profound in the full sense of that word: imagine what it is like to face the question that they felt their own selves were telling them they had to investigate! They knew the degree of ridicule, rejection, and violence that transgender people face. Why were they asking the question except that something inside themselves kept demanding them to do so. By accepting the question to any degree, they knew that it meant accepting the pervasive judgmentalism and shaming that few others experience in the same way. And yet, their experience was that the question they encountered (how can I accept my gender when my body seems otherwise) wanted them to find a reconciliation within themselves.

The first person I met presented as a man. As the person spoke over the course of nearly an hour, as the person felt more secure and welcomed, the person began disclosing herself as a woman. I saw someone emerging from the depths of the person as different from the person I first met. She emerged as if the space were safe enough to emerge and then as if the space were as natural for her to be herself.

Therein I saw the grace of listening. I saw her able to be herself.

Why "The Man Born Blind" in John 9 is a Foundation for an Ecclesial Ethics of Listening?

It might be good to remember that in the man born blind (John 9: 1-41), Jesus and his disciples see the man and ask Jesus, whose sin caused his blindness, the man's or his parents? Jesus responds that it was neither; but that God's work might be shown, Jesus heals the man, by putting mud on his eyes and telling him to wash in the temple pool. When the man is cured and returns to the temple, neither Jesus nor his disciples are present. People are confused when they see the man; could this, they ask, be the same man born blind who has been begging at the temple? He insists that he is the same man and that the one who did it is Jesus. As he is questioned by the crowd, investigated by the Pharisees, abandoned by his parents, and finally rejected from the temple, in each instance he confesses that Jesus was his healer and that Jesus could not be a sinner because only an agent of God could do this miracle. He progressively becomes more articulate in witnessing what Jesus has done and effectively becomes Jesus' witness. This witnessing leads to him being denounced by literally everyone to whom he was ever related and now literally outside the temple, the man is found by Jesus. They speak together; Jesus discloses to him that he is the Son of Man, and the man worships him.

This is easily my favorite pericope in the Scriptures. I love it because of the way Jesus is not present as the man vulnerably tries to explain his healing; I also love it because his own healing is a part, if you will, of his own call to discipleship; finally, I love it because this listener, grows in vulnerability as he grows in his recognition of Jesus.

I would like to emphasize several points. I take my exegetical comments from Karoline M. Lewis, the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.[1]

The first point is to understand that the healing of the man is intimately linked to the discourse on the Good Shepherd in chapter 10. Lewis writes: "In the discourse, Jesus' depicts himself as both the door and the shepherd, and these images are meant to unpack key themes presented in chapter 9. In other words, the blind man and Jesus have already acted out Jesus' words in 10:1-18. As a result, to separate the sign from the discourse is to dislodge the full meanings of Jesus as both door and shepherd and to reduce the healing and witness of the blind man to just one more fantastical miracle of Jesus."[2]

Second, the healing of the man happens without the man's own request. Of course, we need only to think of Paul's own conversion to realize that Jesus' calling of disciples is sometimes, what I call, "an unsolicited interruption." Still, Lewis highlights what many overlook: Jesus' recognition of the man whom he sees first. The healing, she argues, is really a call to discipleship. She writes: "At first, the man born blind appears to be only a pawn or a prop in a plan about which he has no knowledge…. Yet this is not Jesus' first reaction to the blind man. As Jesus is walking along, he sees the blind man...In this man blind from birth, Jesus sees a

[1] Karoline M. Lewis, "The Healing of the Man Born Blind and Jesus as Door and Shepherd (John 9–10)" *John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) 123-149
[2] Lewis, 124.

disciple, a witness, just as he did with the Samaritan woman at the well."[3] There is at the outset an act of recognition; this is not so much a healing story as the call to discipleship for one who knows how to listen well.

Third, verses 6-7 narrate the sign itself. Jesus' "making of mud recalls how this Gospel begins, in the recollection of creation. While not the same word, "dust" in Genesis, "mud" in John 9, the allusion to the creative act of God is unquestionably at work."

Fourth, integral to the sign is the man's listening. Lewis makes a "critical note: the blind man listens to Jesus' voice and follows Jesus' directions—what Jesus' mother first suggested, echoing the response of the royal official in chapter 4 and the man ill for thirty-eight years (Jn 5: 1-14). Hearing the voice of Jesus, as well as seeing, will be important when it comes to discipleship. The blind man first hears Jesus, just as Jesus' sheep hear his voice in chapter 10."[4] In each of these stories the positive response to the command to listen to Jesus's voice is integral to the miracle.

Fifth, the man's growth in understanding of who Jesus is progresses just as the Samaritan woman at the well did (4:19). Noteworthy, is that the man's "sight" is progressing without Jesus being present," a significant theme throughout this Gospel, "blessed are those who do not see and yet come to believe" (20:29). The blind man will develop in his belief in Jesus not with Jesus being present but by witnessing to Jesus' presence in his life. The actual act of testimony has everything to do with the capacity to believe."[5] And again, he listens well to their arguments such that he is able to "flip it" and interrogate his interrogators by the astute listening to their claims and prompting them to hear their own words.

Sixth, as he grows in faith, he begins to live out his discipleship rather quickly: This emerges when the man takes the upper-hand in the discourse in verse 27 and responds to the Pharisees' insistence that he repeat the account of his being able to see. He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" Lewis writes: "'Do you also want to become one of his disciples?,' is the theme at the heart of this entire passage: what it means to be a disciple, what discipleship is, and what the characteristics of a disciple are. The blind man names what is at stake in these two chapters—hearing and discipleship."[6] I would add its growing vulnerably in responsive listening and recognition of Jesus.

Seventh, the hearing and listening between Jesus and the disciple is mutual. Lewis first comments on how in verse 35 Jesus' hears that the Pharisees have thrown out the man born blind and notes "the mutuality between Jesus and his disciples who hear him." She then focuses on how "to find" is the same verb used when Jesus calls the first disciples, by first finding Philip and then calling him to "Follow me."(1:43) In the calling of Philip, Andrew and Simon "the verb 'to find' is used five times in only five verses." Lewis notes: "It is against this backdrop and

[3] Lewis, 126.
[4] Lewis, 127.
[5] Lewis, 128.
[6] Lewis, 130.

thematic focus that we are to read and interpret the implications of Jesus finding the man born blind. As a result, the blind man is now a disciple, found by Jesus, a sheep in the fold."[7]

Like the man born blind we are blessed because though we do not see him, we hear his voice and follow him. The call to discipleship is one that we hear personally and collectively, it is a call in which we are found by Christ and invited to vulnerably recognize him. We are called then to listen first so as to confess and promote the ministry of Jesus.

The entire account ironically ends with the comment, (in 10:20), "Why listen to him?," takes us back to the very beginning of Chapter 9. The question is not to be answered, I think, for those who do not hear the call, but precisely, for those who do.[8]

An Outline of Considerations for an Ethics of Vulnerable Listening

1. Vulnerability: I define vulnerability not as a weakness but as a capacious responsiveness that I take from the philosopher, Judith Butler.
People confuse vulnerability which means "capable of being wounded" with actually being wounded, which is to be injured. If vulnerability meant to be wounded then any one who suffers would want anyone but the vulnerable one to assist. We know, however, that those who suffer look for responses from vulnerable people, because they are the people capable of being affected and capable of being responsive.

2. Here it is important to appreciate that the opposite of a vulnerable person is an invulnerable person, a dominant person who does things on their own. An ethics of vulnerability requires then a receptiveness, a presence known to be responsive in one's listening

3. It is helpful to distinguish forced from chosen vulnerability. Given our world many are vulnerable not by choice or by nature but by oppression. It is important to realize that as we heard in this first section of our gathering for the symposium many of the speakers gave accounts of listening to people whose own vulnerability is highly complex and this requires those in ministry to be attentive to how costly might be the vulnerability of those whom the minister accompanies.

4. By the same token, the minister needs to be attentive about their own vulnerability, where it is a forced one and where it is natural and free.

5. Our own vulnerability helps shape how we recognize those whom we accompany.
Recognition is often the first step to moral engagement; failing to recognize is often the first sign of a failure to be vulnerable. The more people are in precarity, the more they want to be and need to be recognized.

[7] Lewis, 131.
[8] Lewis, 146.

6. Each of us have nonetheless our own styles of listening. Those styles are based on what we think constitutes an ethically right or correct style. When we are involved in the ministry of listening we tend to make our own style normative and yet if we were in a parish or a center where there was shared ministry of listening, we might find that the collective expresses itself with styles different from the our own. Those styles, in their diversity, might extend beyond what we are comfortable with as ethically appropriate. Here the collective will need to generate conversations among the staff, much as a family does, to try to ascertain a framework for accepting (or not) such ethical styles of listening. The standards for a collective center of listening needs to be variegated, but also needs to be ethical.

7. At one point we might want to consider whether we have a responsibility to help those to whom we are listening have the opportunity to go public with their "story." Interpersonal accompaniment through an ecclesial ethics of listening can empower others such that they recognize their story as instructive for others. An ecclesial ethics of listening leads then to questions of whether those in such ministry have the added responsibility of helping others to secure a platform to advocate for themselves and their "kin".

For more bibliography on this see, James F. Keenan, "Building Blocks for Moral Education: Vulnerability, Recognition and Conscience," David DeCosse and Kevin Baxter, ed. *Conscience and Catholic Education: Theology, Administration, and Teaching* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022) 17-30