

THE BEST VALENTINE'S DAY GIFT
A Discursive Mash-up From Cairo to Your Beloved
In 700 Words As Long As You Don't Count The Title Or The Footnotes
by Rev. James M. Truxell

I appreciate the advice¹ that we best understand what God is doing in the world by reading The Bible in one hand and The New York Times in the other. If let our minds roam freely back and forth, all manner of things -- even song lyrics -- might come into our minds. It can provide for interesting "mash-ups." For example:

The demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square calling for the end of the repressive Mubarak regime, were among the concerns I took to church a couple of Sundays back. The pastor wove her sermon around a famous passage from the book of Micah, the 8th century B.C. prophet, writing at a time of national crisis and high anxiety. He rhetorically asked a question and then provided the answer:

"⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"²

I wondered if so many Egyptians would need to be risking so much by their open protests had the regime practiced justice, committed itself to showing mercy, and consciousness that its sovereignty was secondary to that of God? (Indeed, would so many African Americans have needed to risk so much pain and suffering for so many years in their civil rights protests, had American society been committed to this same agenda?)

The worship service ended. Monday presented itself all too soon, and I again sat and listened as a number of distressed couples argued with one another about who was right and who was wrong. *Each* felt poorly treated by the other. Their clash was about how the *other* was failing: to do justice ("You're being unfair!"); to love mercy ("You hold a grudge forever!"); and not walking humbly ("Ha! Your trouble is that you think you're the center of the whole world!").

About that time, some of the lyrics from *Midnight Cowboy* came wafting through my mind:

"Everybody's talking at me.
I don't hear a word they're saying,
Only the echoes of my mind."³

¹ This advice is frequently attributed to the theologian Karl Barth, who, while never saying it exactly this way, certainly taught the principle.

² *cf.* Micah 6:1-8

³ *Midnight Cowboy* starred Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman and won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1969. "Everybody's Talkin' At Me" was written by Fred Neil and performed by Harry Nilsson.

Indeed, neither the husband nor the wife was listening to the other. All they could hear was the strident shouting of their own self-justifying thoughts. That's what happens when people talk *at* each other. It made me long for the weekend! I felt drawn to the sort of desire plaintively expressed in the refrain of that song . . . and I suspected each of them did as well:

“I'm going where the sun keeps shining
Thru' the pouring rain,
Going where the weather suits my clothes,
Backing off of the North East wind,
Sailing on summer breeze
And skipping over the ocean like a stone.”

Yes, the weekend couldn't get here soon enough! But rather than escaping, we all settled in once more to the difficult task of following the first of the Eleven Commandments: that we listen!⁴

Listening is usually a skill acquired slowly and with difficulty, for it requires that we set aside our own thoughts, emotions, agendas, hopes and fears. It means we must create a space within us that is hospitable to the spoken reality of the other: to *their* thoughts, emotions, agendas, hopes and fears. That requires a bit of humility. It requires that we value the other person as well as ourselves.

But when we apply ourselves to the task of really listening, we give a *gift of enormous significance* to the other person. And that is particularly true when the other person is distressed at *us*! The experience of being really heard allows us to begin to return to a calmer state . . . a condition essential to our giving a similar gift to the one who has just listened to us.

I can think of no better Valentine gift, than the gift of listening . . . *really* listening to those whom we love. Further, if that gift is given to those with whom we disagree, even to those whom we might consider adversaries . . . good things can happen. Things like justice, mercy, and humility of spirit. And *that* would truly be a place “where the sun keeps shining through the pouring rain!”

⁴ “Hear O Israel!” That is how the Ten Commandments begin. If you count it rightly, then, there are eleven commandments! *Likrat Shabbat* (“Welcome The Sabbath”) is Reform Judaism’s book for families about observing the Sabbath around Friday’s dinner table. There is a beautiful and profound meditation in it called “Listen!” (pp. 74-75). It starts with these words: “Judaism begins with the commandment: ‘Hear, O Israel!’ But what does it really mean to hear? The person who attends a concert with his mind on business hears – but does not really hear.” The meditation ends with prayerful expressions of the desire to really listen. Among them: “May we hear the music of the world, and the infant’s cry, and the lover’s sigh. May we hear the call for help of the lonely soul, and the sound of the breaking heart. May we hear the words of our friends, and also their unspoken pleas and dreams. May we hear within ourselves the yearnings that are struggling for expression. May we hear You, O God. . . .Hear the prayers we offer to You this day, O God, and may we hear them too.”