

Are You Listening?

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1 Samuel 3:1-10, Matthew 17:1-5

We all know how important listening is in human relationships. Any marriage where the partners stop listening and cease paying attention to each other is a marriage in trouble.

A husband was looking through the paper and came upon a study that said women use more words than men. Excited to prove to his wife his long-held contention that women in general and his wife in particular talked too much, he showed her the study results, which stated: *"Men use about 15,000 words per day, but women use 30,000."*

His wife thought awhile, then finally she said to her husband, *"It's because we have to repeat everything we say."*

The husband said, *"What?"*

If not listening is a problem in marriages and in all human relationships, it is even more a problem with our relationship with God. If you wonder why your faith doesn't seem to be growing, could it be that it is because you have stopped listening to God? *"Faith comes from what is heard,"* says the Apostle Paul. If you fail to hear or refuse to hear, you cannot grow.

God knows we have a listening problem. This morning we read the story of the transfiguration of Christ. "Transfiguration" is a fancy word, which means, literally, "to change form." Jesus took his inner circle – Peter, James and John up the mountain for a spiritual retreat, and while they were up there, Jesus was "transfigured" – the Lord's face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white, and he was joined by Moses and Elijah, the two greatest figures in Israel's history. It was an intense spiritual experience that was hard to put in words. The disciples were awestruck. And then came a bright cloud, and out of the cloud a voice: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"* **Listen to him!**

Sometimes I wonder why God doesn't put it on billboards along the freeway, or write it up in the sky or shout it down from a huge, cosmic megaphone so that there is no mistaking the message and all may hear: *"Jesus is my Son...listen to him!"*

But vast numbers of humanity do not listen to him. Even those of us who are members of his church do not always listen to him. Seems crazy doesn't it: people who call Jesus Lord do not listen – don't always pay attention to what he is saying. Why is that?

Could it be that folks are too busy? Are we? It's very easy to be so busy serving the Lord and serving others that there is no time to listen to him.

I think of that familiar story of Jesus visiting in the home of Martha and Mary. Martha is the busy servant, preparing the meal in the kitchen, while Mary sits in the living room with their honored guest, listening to what he has to say. Martha is resentful that she is doing all the work

herself and goes to Jesus, telling him to tell her sister to get up out of her Lazy Boy and help in the kitchen. Martha even seems to chew Jesus out, saying *“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself?”* Gently, but firmly, Jesus answers her: *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”*

The better part is listening to Jesus, for unless one listens to what he is saying, our serving degenerates into frantic, exhausting activity, lacking meaning and purpose and direction. Listening and serving go together, but *listening* – sitting at the Lord’s feet in prayer and worship and attentive listening is the top priority; for there we get our marching orders and our inspiration to serve.

Why do so many of us fail to listen to the Lord? We are too busy...

Or perhaps we miss what the Lord has to say because we are practicing selective listening. We humans are good at this sort of thing: we hear only what we want to hear: we listen carefully when our desires are expressed, less so when something is said to discomfort us. We miss the message!

On Dec. 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright kept their hand built airplane in the air for 59 seconds at Kitty Hawk. They sent a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio: *“First sustained flight today 59 seconds. Hope to be home for Christmas.”*

The excited sister took the news to the local newspaper editor. The next morning, to her shock and dismay, the headline stated in bold letters: **“POPULAR LOCAL BICYCLE MERCHANTS TO BE HOME FOR HOLIDAYS!”** The biggest news story of the time passed Dayton by that day, because the editor had missed the message!

Lots of folks miss the message of the Lord, because they either don’t want to hear it (because its challenging or discomfoting), or they are expecting some other message that fits their expectations and their agenda. Selective listening...

An American Indian was in downtown New York, walking with his friend, who lived in NYC. Suddenly he said, *“I hear a cricket.”*

“Oh, you’re crazy,” his friend replied.

“No, I hear a cricket. I do! I’m sure of it.”

“It’s the noon hour. There are people bustling around, cars honking, taxis squealing, noises from the city. I’m sure you can’t hear it.”

“I’m sure I do.” He listened attentively and then walked to the corner, across the street, and looked all around. Finally on the corner he found a shrub in a large cement planter. He dug beneath the leaves and found a cricket.

His friend was astounded. But the Cherokee said, *“No, my ears are no different from yours. It simply depends on what you are listening to. Here, let me show you.”*

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change -- a few quarters, some dimes, nickels, and pennies. And he dropped it on the concrete.

Every head within a block turned around.

"You see what I mean?" he said as he began picking up his coins. *"It all depends on what you are listening for."*

Too often we hear only what we want to hear. We are listening for the wrong things.

Why do so many of us fail to listen to God? We are too busy. We are listening to the wrong things and are simply not paying attention.

Or, we could add, perhaps we are not applying ourselves enough. Listening to God takes work; it demands attentiveness. God speaks to us through the written word – the Bible – and the preached word – the Sermon – and also in prayer. Reading the Bible, listening to a sermon, practicing prayer...all takes work. Face it -- none of it comes without effort.

The Bible is a long and difficult book – and it takes work to mine its treasures. And I admit it's often hard to listen to a sermon – especially one that hasn't been put together very well.

There is the story of the student who preached a first sermon in the seminary chapel. The instructor said after a long pause: *"Your sermon today reminds me of the mercy and peace of God. Like God's mercy it seemed to endure forever, and like God's peace, it passed all human understanding."*

Someone has said, *"Preaching is the fine art of talking in someone else's sleep!"* The Apostle Paul once famously put a fellow to sleep when preaching -- the poor fellow nodded off and fell out a window!

Dr. Ralph Nichols, an authority on the subject of communication, believes that we think four, perhaps five times faster than we talk. This means that if a speaker utters one hundred twenty words a minute, the audience thinks at about five hundred words a minute. It's easy to take mental excursions during a sermon -if you don't catch yourself and work at being attentive.

Research at the University of Minnesota reveals that in listening to a ten-minute talk, hearers operate at only twenty-eight per cent efficiency. And the longer the talk, the less we understand, the less we track with our ears what somebody's mouth is saying. There is something to be said for short sermons!

Listening to God's Word read and preached takes work! Just as the preacher has to use some energy to communicate verbally, so you need to expend energy listening—your role in the pew is not passive. And just as active listening brings people closer to you, so too does it bring God closer to you. Your faith and your love for God grows and you gain a new perception of what God wants you to do.

We read the beautiful story of the young Samuel in the temple. He kept hearing someone call his name. The old man Eli in his wisdom realized it was God and he told the boy to listen. And sure enough, God called again to Samuel and Samuel said, *“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*

God is calling you and me; God is calling each of us by name to serve him in the world. God speaks to us through Scripture and Sermon and Sacrament. God speaks to us in moments of prayer and meditation and communion. I think again of the words of the voice from the cloud: *“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!”*

Do we have any idea who is speaking to us right now? He is none other than the Lord of life. We had better pay attention!

May the words of Samuel be our own, every time we gather in Christ’s name – *“Speak, Lord, your servants are listening.”*