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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

February 19, 2012
Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 2-9.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Do you have anyone in your family who has a listening problem? Notice I did not say a hearing problem. Many people have ears that work quite well; nevertheless, they are very selective in what they hear.

The story is told of King Edward VII. His grandson, Prince David, had a good relationship with his grandfather. Still, David was a child, and adults in England during this period, particularly royalty, were not known to listen to children. At dinner on one occasion little David tried to get his grandfather's attention. He was reprimanded immediately for interrupting the king's conversation at table. So the young prince sat in silence until given permission to speak. And when he was allowed finally to address his grandfather, he said, "It's too late now, Grandpapa. It was a caterpillar on your lettuce, but you've eaten it."

The king should have listened to his grandson. It pays to listen to children, to friends, to coworkers, to other family members. Yet authentic listen is rare. Former President Bill Clinton once compared it to running a cemetery. "Being President," he said, "is like running a cemetery. You've got a lot of people under you and nobody's listening."

You've heard the old aphorism that God gave us two ears but only one mouth indicating that God wanted us to spend twice as much time listening as talking. However, it could be that God gave us two ears and one mouth because listening is twice as hard as talking. As someone has said, most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of witnesses.

Sometimes, for one reason or another, we deliberately do not listen. Either we are not interested or something else has our attention.

I read about an old Mutt and Jeff routine. A few of you more experienced members may remember the Mutt and Jeff cartoon series. It hasn't been

published in thirty years, but it had a loyal following in days gone by. Mutt and Jeff built a sound-proof room. To test it, Mutt went into the room and closed the door, and Jeff yelled from the outside, "Can you hear me?" And Mutt answered, "No."

It's an absurd routine, of course, but sometimes we may deliberately tune out someone else. Paul Tillich, noted theologian of a past generation, once wrote these important words: "The first duty of love is to listen." And that's true -- the first duty of love is to listen. Listening is particularly important, I think, in families. That should be self-evident, but evidently it's not.

There was a study some time back in San Francisco of teenage prostitutes. These young women were asked about their home life growing up. "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" the researchers asked. Invariably their answer, which was accompanied by sadness and tears, was, "What I needed most was someone to listen to me -- someone who cared enough to listen."

How many children and teenagers would echo that same cry? How many spouses, how many friends? We all need someone who will listen. Good listening is like tuning in a radio station. For good results you can listen to only one station at a time, otherwise there is distortion and frustration. Listening requires a choice of where to place your attention. To tune into your spouse, or your friend, or your children, you must first choose to put away all that will divide your attention. That might mean laying down the newspaper, moving away from the dishes in the sink, turning the television off, putting down the book you're reading, setting aside your projects.

Studies show that most of us are not as good at multitasking as we think we are. When it comes to listening, there is really no such thing as multitasking. It's been said that we spend about forty percent of our waking hours listening; yet most of the time we are only listening at twenty-five percent efficiency and that creates many of our problems.

But I read an article that said that there are in this world hearing aides. The first one is listen with our eyes. Approximately eighty percent of communication is nonverbal. Facial expressions and body language usually tell the real story. Look at people when you listen to them. Listen with your heart, be sympathetic, tune into the emotions behind the words. And finally, make it a habit to take time to listen to the people around you. This is to say that listening is hard work. It has to be something you are committed to -- listening to your family, listening to your coworkers, listening to your friends, listening to those

who come into contact with you as you go about your daily business. “The first duty of love is to listen.”

Of course, our primary responsibility in this world as Christians is to listen to Jesus. If we are poor listening to others, think how poor we are listening to Jesus. Today’s gospel from Mark is that magnificent scene on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter and James and John with him up a high mountain where they were alone, and there Jesus was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, and there appeared before them Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us put up three shelters, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” And Mark tells us that he didn’t know what to say, they were so frightened. Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud, “This is my son whom I love; listen to him!”

That has always been the Christian primary task of listening to Jesus, for he is the one who can guide us toward better relationships and a more fulfilling life. You and I need to listen to Jesus, and we need to trust what Jesus says. We need to turn our eyes toward Jesus; we need to listen to him with our hearts, and we need to take time each day for the sole task of listening. What does Jesus have to say to us that we need to hear? He may want to talk with us about how we are treating family members or coworkers or friends. He may want to talk to us about our discipleship, about our faithfulness to the church. Jesus may want to talk to us about some undesirable behavior that has crept into our life, but Jesus may simply want to offer us encouragement as we live our lives.

Of course, some of the things Jesus would say to us are not things we might want to hear. Like the grandmother who turned off her hearing aid, some of us might work very hard at not listening to Jesus, but we need to listen and we need to trust him. Today’s lesson is for us in particular. “This is my son whom I love; listen to him.” Are you willing to take that step? Are you willing to fulfill the first duty of love -- to listen with your eyes, to listen with your heart, to take time to really listen to your family and your friends and your coworkers and particularly to Jesus?

Dr. Noah Gilson, a medical doctor, tells about an eighteen-year-old patient of his named Mark who developed an autoimmune reaction that left him almost completely paralyzed. He wasn’t even able to speak. Mark’s parents insisted that he was a fighter that somehow he’d get through this. But meanwhile, immobile and on a ventilator, Dr. Gilson wondered how Mark was ever going to be able to ask questions or be involved in any way in his own care. The solution was simple and at the same time quite remarkable. Mark’s parents would sit at

Mark's side each day and recite the alphabet. When they got to a letter that Mark needed to spell a word, he'd nod yes, and they'd write it down, then start over and wait for Mark to nod again. And this went hour after hour, day after day. Can you imagine in your wildest imagination a more laborious task? Yet Mark's parents never lost patience, and Mark was involved with every decision regarding his care. Unfortunately standard therapy wasn't helping, so Dr. Gilson proposed a risky procedure to filter Mark's blood. Mark agreed, and after the treatment Mark showed decided improvement, and soon he could move his toes and his legs and his arms. In fact, Mark made a full recovery and went on to college and today is doing very well.

Looking back, Dr. Gilson says that he is still in awe of Mark and his parents. He calls the parents some of the most amazing people he has ever met -- sitting by Mark's bed for hours patiently listening to their child speak letter by letter. Dr. Gilson says that when he saw Mark after his recovery, I wanted to tell him of my shame when my children tried to talk to me, and I brushed them off because I didn't have time to listen. I want to say I never forget him or his parents.

In her book called *The Listeners* Taylor Caldwell says "Man does not need to go to the moon or other solar systems; he does not require bigger and better bombs and missiles. His basic needs are few, and it takes little to acquire them. He can survive on the smallest amount of bread in the meanest shelter, but his real need -- his most terrible need -- is for someone to listen to him."

We all, in this life, need someone to listen to us. But we also need to listen; we need to listen to one another, and we need to listen to Jesus' voice. A voice came from the cloud, "This is my son whom I love; listen to him." And that's not simply good advice -- that's a command, a command from God.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs