

Listening
Mark 7:31-37
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 6, 2009

A major corporation hired a consulting firm to evaluate its employees' communication skills. When the final report came out, one of the findings showed, on average, each employee heard only sixty percent of what was said in meetings and one on one conversations.

This shouldn't surprise you, if only because of your own personal experiences in the workplace and your home. Both my wife and daughter swear I'm either going deaf or at least practice selective listening because they constantly need to repeat themselves. I plead guilty as charged: my listening skills aren't what they should be.

Another finding: when employees were in meetings they concentrated more on what they were going to say, instead of listening intently to what others were trying to say. I think most of us would have to plead guilty to that too.

When I was in seminary, one of my professors tried to help us become aware of our poor listening habits. On the first day of our pastoral counseling class she made her case by pointing out when we greet anybody saying, "Hi, how are you?" most of the time we're not really interested in how the other person is really doing, we're just automatically reciting a generic greeting. To break this bad habit she then announced, "If you ever meet me on campus and say, "Hi Dr. Brown, how are you?" I'm going to be intentionally rude and ignore you."

That same afternoon I passed Dr Brown on the sidewalk saying, "Hi Dr. Brown, how are you?" She walked right past me. I turned around caught up to her and said, "Sorry about that." With a smug grin she said, "That's O.K. you're learning."

I'd like to think I'm still learning, but sometimes I wonder.

Not surprisingly most congregations have communication issues. Christians are just as capable of practicing selective listening and not fully communicating what we want others to hear. This is true between individuals, but it's especially true with communications between boards and ministry teams. When one group makes a decision, even if it emails all the interested parties, there's still no guarantee everybody's listening.

Certainly our congregation needs to make a concerted effort to overcome our systemic communication lapses and we are working on it. In fact on Saturday September 12 we'll be holding a communications seminar led by our consultant Denise Van Eck. I hope we have all board members and representatives from each of our ministry teams attending so we can all become better listeners and communicators and enhance the quality of our life together in the beloved community.

Of course, poor listening and communication habits are not a modern day phenomenon. There are countless references in the Bible all about the importance of listening, especially so God's people can clearly hear that still small voice constantly whispering in our ears. There're also many stories of God's people hearing only what they wanted to hear and so turned a deaf ear to the prophets, the apostles and Jesus himself. That's why Jesus introduced many of his parables with the command, "Listen," and usually concluded his lessons with, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!"

This morning's lesson from Mark's gospel can be heard on several different levels. The obvious way of course is literally. Jesus healed a deaf man. His neighbors, hearing about Jesus' reputation as a faith healer, brought their friend to Jesus hoping he'd be cured. Naturally Jesus didn't disappoint them.

An equally valid interpretation is to hear this story metaphorically. One of the recurring themes in Mark's gospel is the disciples' inability to hear Jesus' gospel on his terms and not their own.

Jesus' challenge was two fold: reveal himself as the long-expected Messiah, and just as important, help his followers unlearn their preconceived notions of who the Messiah would be and what the Messiah would do. Certainly they heard the prophecies promising his coming, but they really weren't listening. They expected another King David, not the Suffering Messiah whose Kingdom was not of this world. Likewise, we fall into the same trap, waiting for the God we want instead of accepting the God we have. We too are guilty of selective listening and that's precisely why this story, among others, made its way into the Gospels. Whether you're physically deaf or not, God wants you to open your ears so you can really listen and experience open and clear two-way communication with God and each other. How else can we properly love and serve God and our neighbor if we won't listen to God and our neighbor? "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

So besides taking this story literally, also see it metaphorically: Jesus took the man aside privately, away from the crowd, put his fingers in his ears, spat and touched his tongue, then looking heavenward gave a deep sigh and said to the deaf man, "Be opened." Right away the man could hear and speak plainly.

But even though he could now hear, he still wasn't listening. Jesus ordered the man and his friends to say nothing to no one, but instead they went off, loudly broadcasting how Jesus makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.

As the warden famously observed in Cool Hand Luke, "What we have here is the failure to communicate!" Maybe the man's friends could be excused for not listening to Jesus, after all they witnessed a miracle, how could they not keep quiet? But the bottom line is they didn't listen and did exactly what Jesus didn't want them to do.

There's a reason Jesus wanted to keep this healing a secret. He discerned the man and his friends saw Jesus as primarily a miracle worker. True, Jesus' public ministry was

both teaching and healing, but Jesus didn't want to be pegged as just another teacher and healer. His main objective was to usher in the Kingdom of God by dying for the sins of the world. It's important for us to hear this: Jesus' primary objective was to go to Jerusalem and be crucified. Next Sunday's sermon will be based on Mark's story of the disciples refusing to hear when Jesus plainly told them this primary objective. More selective listening.

You may be thinking if you lived in Judea in Jesus' time and literally heard his voice, you'd have an easier time listening to what he said to you. Maybe so. But know this: you're just as capable today of hearing and listening to Jesus' voice as those who lived with him 2,000 years ago. I frequently make this point to my young friends in the Baltimore County Jail when they tell me they've never heard God's voice speaking directly to them.

I say, "Sure you have, and I'll prove it to you right now. Whenever you were about to do something wrong, did you ever hear an inner voice say, "Don't do it?" Then you've heard God's voice, but you weren't listening, otherwise you wouldn't be here. So, if you're able to hear God warn you, "Don't do that," you're fully capable of hearing God say, "I love you," and "I forgive you," and "Instead of doing that why not instead do this?"

Today we're celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion. Listen hard to the words of institution, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood shed for you. Take and eat. Take and drink. Do this to remember me."

As you hold the bread and the wine in your hands before you eat and drink, open your ears and listen hard. Our Lord is inviting you to fall deeper in love with him. And don't be surprised if from time to time you become aware of God speaking to you, telling you what you need to hear at any given moment.

How will you know when God is speaking? Just listen.