

Feb 11

Sermon: "Listen to Him"

Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

Jesus takes the three disciples who were his closest friends with him when he goes up a mountain to pray. The shadows of Jerusalem and the cross that await him are falling across Jesus' life. He knows that soon those dark forces that have been opposing him will come together. As was his custom, he went apart to pray, to center his life anew. (Coming up during Lent we will be looking at the prayer he taught his disciples.) This time during his prayers something happened. His appearance changed as he was bathed in a Holy light. This harkens back to the stories of Moses on Mt. Sinai. When he received the Ten Commandments, Moses spent so much time in the presence of God that afterwards, for a time, his face shone with an unearthly light. This time, as Jesus was in prayer, God drew near to him in a visible way. Even more, Moses and Elijah came to him. Peter, James, and John are viewing this when God speaks to them. God says, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him."

Even though I have read this account many times it was that last phrase, "Listen to him" that jumped out at me. The disciples had been with Jesus for almost three years. Jesus had taught them his truths on a daily basis. Even more, they had seen him perform amazing miracles of healing and even seen the wind and waves obey him. Yet here is God telling them to listen to Jesus. Obviously, God felt that they were not hearing important things they needed to hear before Jesus was arrested and crucified. It is as if God was telling them that they were deaf and needed to be healed!

There are two kinds of deafness that we have that has nothing to do with age or physical condition. There is a deliberate deafness where you refuse to listen to what another is saying. This was the response of the Pharisees towards Jesus. They came to listen to him with their minds already made up. They were there to trap him or to ridicule him.

We see deliberate deafness a lot in the political arena. Both parties are talking to each other and to the media with the other side not listening, or listening with their

minds already made up. What is the result? Political gridlock. When we listen with our minds made up, there is never a chance to be moved, to change or to grow. It happened between Jesus and the Pharisees, it happens in politics, and it, at times, happens in our lives.

I have experienced this phenomenon. I recall having a young man appear on my doorstep one afternoon. He had a set faith speech that he was determined to give. It did not matter to him that I was not interested, that I was the minister of a church, or anything else. He acted as if I was hanging on his every word. The only way I could have stopped his speech was to slam the door in his face, which I was unwilling to do. When he finished he looked at me expectantly. I am not sure what he expected, but it was clear that he thought I had carefully listened to him even though he had not given me the same courtesy.

All of us can be so sure of our opinions that we practice a form of deliberate deafness. We refuse to listen to or engage in any way with others who have a different opinion. This leads to the creating of walls and causes animosity. It is something we have to guard against. Even when we disagree, we need to be grace-filled enough to listen. I hope I was that way with that young man, but I doubt it.

I have to ask myself once in a while, "Am I deliberately not hearing what God wants me to hear?" We all know those times God calls us to do things that are outside of our comfort zone, or are harder to do than we want, and so we just pretend not to hear. It sometimes is easier to be deaf to a call to serve than becoming involved, or to be deaf to a reminder that we need to forgive when we want to be angry. Is God saying to us today: "Listen to me!"

Now I do not believe that the disciples were practicing deliberate deafness. My guess is that God's challenge to listen was because they practiced something called "Selective deafness" or "selective listening." We had a dog. Cleo was usually well behaved. She would listen and respond to commands. As long as she was on leash or in our fenced yard you could not ask for a better behaved dog. But, if she got out of the fenced yard she would take off running. You could call and call and she acted as if she

never heard your voice. There were times I would have to jump in the car and chase her down the street until she was so exhausted that she would finally listen.

Selective listening is something we see in the disciples. Jesus talks about how all should take up their cross and follow him. They heard the words, they maybe even talked a bit about what it meant, but a little later you would see, by their actions, that they had not really taken it in. Because one time, shortly after a conversation about servanthood, you hear them having an argument over which one of them is the most important. Selective listening happens when you take your preconceived ideas and opinions and only hear those things that justify them.

God knew that the disciples were going to go through some difficult times ahead. They needed to listen, really listen to all Jesus had to tell them in these last few days they were going to be together. They needed to listen to things that might challenge them. They needed to be open to hearing ideas that could change how they viewed life and faith. We all can be guilty of selective listening. The question then is, "How do we actively listen to God?" You can go on line and get all sorts of suggestions concerning how to be an active listener. Businesses have workshops for their sales people about this all the time because they realize the importance of their employees really listening to their customers. We can learn something from business. If it is important in the economic realm, it is important in the realm of faith

Be Fully In The Moment

Have you ever been speaking to someone when they are clearly distracted? You probably thought this was annoying, frustrating, and possibly disrespectful. At that point you may have even become angry or shut the conversation down. How does God feel when you go to God in prayer? Do you take time to quiet your mind? Do you prepare yourself to be open to what God might be saying to you? Are you fully in the moment with God? Or, does God find you distracted. You have a million things on your mind, so it wanders as you pray or read the Bible. You talk at God because you have things to say and places to go. You don't really spend time quietly listening or centering. All of us need an occasional reminder to be fully in the moment, when we are in the presence of

God. Prayer is more than speaking out our desires, it should also be when we give uninterrupted quiet time to God so we can listen, really listen, to what God might be saying. These words are also important when talking to others. Being fully in the moment. It is a sign of respect.

Listen to Understand

The key to effective listening isn't really "listening" at all – it's understanding. Understanding requires you to set aside your personal agenda and offer a kind of respect and openness. You don't have to agree but you have to at least see the validity of what is being said. This is where we see things breaking down for the disciples. They would hear Jesus' words, but not with the openness to really accept and let those words change them. They worried about place when Jesus talked about service. They saw problems when Jesus saw opportunity wanting to feed 5000 people. Jesus often asked them, "Where is your faith?" or "Why are you afraid?" God wanted them to listen to Jesus with an openness that can lead to understanding.

That kind of listening changes you. When I open my heart and my life to really hear other opinions, life journeys and struggles, it always changes me. That is why it is hard to listen to understand, because I am not sure I always want to change.

Listen to hear, not to respond

For many of us, responding is a reflex. In fact, immediately responding to what someone else has just said is a signal that you don't understand, you don't care, and you're not listening. Yet how often we do this with God. We hear, love your enemies and we quickly respond but you don't mean... Or we are challenged to forgive and we think, "once they ask for forgiveness." Or in prayers we feel challenged to do something and immediately come up with the reasons it won't work. Response is often a way to keep from listening and understanding. This is something I work on continually. I am quick to respond and I need to pause and hear and take in what has been said. I need to give the words the time needed for me to understand what was said and why they were said.

This doesn't mean we don't respond. There is a place for responding. When it comes to conversations with others we can respond after we have thought about it. When it comes to God we should always respond and as quickly as possible when the response is in the positive. Sometimes we get that nudge from God and immediately respond, knowing it is the right thing to do. We hear a plea for volunteers and our hand shoots up. We are upset with the actions of others and are reminded that we are to offer forgiveness, and immediately begin offering forgiveness and praying that God take away any lasting bitterness. Or we see where God is pointing us to offer love and compassion to another who is carrying a heavy load and instead of counting the cost, just roll up our sleeves and go to work. Positive responses to God's call to help, to forgive, to love are a good thing. When our response to God is to dig in our heels and come up with all the reasons that what we are being nudged to do isn't practical or right, this response it is probably telling us that we are not listening.

If the disciples had to be reminded to listen so do we. May we be open to placing our lives in a place that we can really hear with an openness that allows us to fully understand and, when appropriate, respond as we have heard God calling us to do.