

LISTEN!

(02/02/2020)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 3:1-10
Luke 9:28-36

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. . . . Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’” (1 Samuel 3:1,4)

There is a Zen story about a master and his disciple that illustrates the importance of listening. The disciple complained that, even after many years, the master would not share the secret of enlightenment with him. Although the master denied that this was true, the disciple refused to believe him.

One day the master and the disciple were walking together in the hills when they heard a bird sing.

“Did you hear that bird sing?” asked the master.

“Yes,” replied the disciple.

“If you *really* heard that bird sing, you will know that I have not hidden the ultimate secret from you,” said the master.

Suddenly the disciple was enlightened.

What is the message of the story? If we *really* heard a bird sing or the sound of a rushing stream, if we *really* saw a bare winter tree the way Brother Lawrence saw the tree that changed his life and led to his development of the spiritual discipline of the Practice of the Presence of God, we would not only know the meaning of the story, we would know *God*. We would know beyond words and concepts. We would experience what it means to be enlightened.

The Jesuit Anthony DeMello, whose book *One Minute Wisdom* we will soon begin reading in our Tuesday afternoon study group, in commenting on this story, said,

What was that you said? You have heard dozens of birds sing and have seen hundreds of trees? Ah, was it the tree you saw or the label? If you look at a tree and see a tree, you have not really seen the tree. When you look at the tree and see a miracle--then, at last, you have seen! Did your heart never fill with wordless wonder when you heard a bird in song?

This morning, as we prepare ourselves to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us think about what it means to listen. Listening is a special kind of presence. We bring this presence to ourselves when we listen to the deepest parts of ourselves. We bring this presence to

other people when we are physically and emotionally present to them, when we truly listen to them. We bring this presence to God when we listen to what God is saying to us.

The psychoanalyst Karl Menninger has said:

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.

Menninger is saying that listening is a creative force. It functions like a magnet—drawing the two parties closer together. It is a creative energy field in our relationships with our family and friends. It is a creative energy field in our relationship with God. This is because we not only listen to God, God listens to us. God hears, feels our prayers. By drawing us closer, God’s listening creates us, enables us to unfold, expand, individuate.

Dare we say that the creative force of which Menninger speaks works both ways? Is it possible that when we listen to God, we help to create God? Remember, a relationship, if it is a real relationship, should shape both parties. Our ability, our willingness to open ourselves to God, to listen to God, enables our consciousness to expand. As we listen to God, we enable God’s consciousness to expand as well. Through God’s listening to us and through our listening to God we co-create the universe.

God speaks to us in many different ways--if we have ears to hear. As the Zen master noted, God speaks to us and is present to us through the beauty of nature. The Hebrew scriptures witness to how God spoke through the Law and the prophets, through the nation of Israel. The Christian scriptures witness to how God spoke through the Incarnation, the Word become flesh. God spoke through Jesus of Nazareth--through his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection. In this morning’s gospel lesson, God tells the disciples, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

The Protestant Reformers emphasized the importance of the Bible. They believed that God speaks to us through the Bible, and that everyone should be able to read the Bible in his/her own language. As Protestants, the Bible is central to our faith.

The Roman Catholic church has historically emphasized the importance of the church. They believe that God has spoken to each generation through the teachings of the church. Whereas Protestants tend to center their worship in the Bible and the sermon, the central part of worship for Catholics is the eucharist, the celebration of Holy Communion.

Both of these religious traditions, despite their differences, hold a central belief in common. It is the belief that God seeks to be present to us through the Bible and through the church, and that both serve as channels of presence. Everything in our worship service speaks to us--if we listen.

Listening is a special kind of presence. Whether we experience God through our sacred music, the words of scripture, or the elements of bread and wine, our experience of that God who creates, expands, and unfolds us depends on our ability to listen.

How foolish to think that God speaks to us only in certain limited or prescribed ways! As the Zen master noted, if we *truly* saw the miracle of a tree, if we heard the song of a bird not with our ears but with our heart, we would no longer have to believe--we would know!

We need to listen to God as God calls us forth into fullness of life as individuals, as a church, and as a world. We need to learn to listen to the moving wind of the Holy Spirit. In John 3:8 we read what Jesus said to Nicodemus:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit

We, like Nicodemus, need to listen to the sound of the Holy Spirit. We, like Samuel, need to listen to the still small voice that whispers to us from within.

Listening is the most important dimension of prayer. Prayer is an opening of ourselves to God, a listening for the different ways God can speak to us. God is constantly reaching out to us, but our ability to enter into this relationship depends on our ability to listen.

In the moments of quiet in our communion service, let us listen very carefully for that still small voice that called out to Samuel. Let us open our inner ears to that God who is very near to us, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Let us open our hearts to that God who is trying to create us, trying to shape the unfolding of our life. God is speaking to us in many different ways, if we would only take the time to listen.

In 1895, Clara Scott wrote both the words and the music to one of my favorite hymns. Let this be our prayer as we prepare to enter into the presence of our Lord through the Sacrament of Holy Communion:

*Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,*

Everything false will disappear.

*Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see;
Open my ears, illumine me,
Spirit divine.*

Have you heard the song of a bird? Then you know the secret!

*A communion meditation shared by the Rev. Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
February 2, 2020*