Sunday, May 9, 1976
LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!
Mark 4:1-9

Often Jesus began a parable or one of his teaching sessions with the word, “Listen!” And then at the end, as in the case of the parable of the sower just read, he would add, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” It was his way of saying, “Pay attention to what is being said! Listen to the inner meaning.”

Jesus knew that people, then and now, are often too busy to stop and listen. So, on this “Mother’s Day” let’s talk about “Christian listening,” parents to children, children to parents, husbands to wives and wives to husbands and friend to friend.

Recently, I came across a story about a child who had been in the courts, was listed as a juvenile delinquent and who wrote a letter to his parents, thanking them for all they had done for him, but also disclosing his great pain that they hadn’t had time to listen:’

Dear Folks:

Thank you for everything, but I am going to Chicago and try and start some kind of new life. You asked me why I did those things and why I gave you so much trouble, and the answer is easy for me to give you, but I am wondering if you will understand.

Remember when I was about six or seven and I used to want you to just listen to me? I remember all the nice things you gave me for Christmas and my birthday and I was really happy with the things — about a week--at the time I got the things, but the rest of the time during the year I really didn’t want presents, I just wanted all the time for you to listen to me like I was somebody who felt things too, because I remember when I felt things you often said you were too busy.

Mom you were a wonderful cook, and you had everything so clean, and you were tired so much from doing all those things that made you busy; but you know some-thing, Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well if you had only sat down with me a while during the day and said to me, “Tell me all about it so I can maybe help you understand.

I think that all the kids who are doing so many things that grown-ups are tearing out their hair worrying about are really looking for somebody that will have time to listen a few minutes and who really and truly will treat them as they would a grown-up who might be used to them, you know — polite to them. If you folks had ever said to me, “Pardon me” when you interrupted me, I’d have dropped dead.

If anybody asks you where I am, tell them I’ve gone looking for somebody with time because I’ve got a lot of things I want to talk about.

Love to all,
Your Son

This morning what we are calling “Christian listening” can be seen as having three parts. This letter emphasizes one part of listening, the need for listening to others and having others 1isten to us.

Recently a man said to me, “Well I may not know a lot, but at least I’m a good listener.” Yet it is often the fact that a person who prides himself or herself on being a good listener, may be a passive listener and not an active one.

A dog is a good passive listener. He fixes those big brown sympathetic eyes upon you and lets you pour out your woes to him, sometimes even licking your hand during the recital. But I don’t know anyone who has solved many problems by having a one-way seminar with a dog.

An expert bartender is a superlative passive listener — or seems to be even when he doesn’t comprehend a word you are saying. He knows just when to put in the knowing “ah” and the approving, “how true,” and the consoling, “that’s life for you!” But a person has to be pretty drunk to believe that he or she is achieving any real communion across the bar.

Listening to others or being listened to, needs active discriminating listening. We need people who know how and when to break in with “That’s not so,” or “You’re deluding yourself,” or “what do you mean by that remark?” These are people who keep us on pitch, who help us to harmonize our conflicting emotions and who hear our inner meanings. They are not mere echo chambers or tape recorders for our • unresolved fears or our infantile wishes. It’s the kind of listener we need and the kind of listener we need to be.

And contrary to popular opinion, it is often the good talker who makes the best listener. A good talker (by which I do not mean the egomaniacal bore, who always talks himself) is sensitive to expression, to tone and color and inflection in human speech. Jesus Christ was a good talker and a good listener.

In a time of so much noise all around us and of voices bombarding us continually, we need to learn to be discriminating active listeners to those closest to us and who need us.

Sometimes people will do seemingly strange things to get our attention so that we will listen to them. Children may run away from home to get their parents to listen. A wife may leave her husband, or the husband leave the wife. A person may attempt suicide in an effort to get someone’s attention.

We all know the story about the city fellow who bought a mule, but soon realized that he didn’t have the faintest notion of how to get the mule to obey his instructions. He talked nicely to it, he cussed at it, but nothing would work. So, he hired a professional mule trainer. That man approached the mule with a murderous gleam in his eye and a heavy wooden board in his hand. He took a roundhouse swing and socked the mule just as hard as he could. The mule didn’t even blink. The mule-trainer whacked him again. “Say man,” protested the owner, “are you fixing to murder my mule?” “It’s easy to see you know nothing about these critters,” said the mule-trainer, “the first thing you have to do is to get their attention.”

2. A second part of Christian listening is that of learning to listen to oneself. Too often we run away from ourselves, and we don’t hear the messages that come from within us and from our bodies. Jesus Christ knew the importance of listening to himself. Part of the meaning of the story of his temptations deals with this. He went into the wilderness to be alone, to listen to himself and to listen to God.

By listening to himself, he discovered some of the temptations that were within him and with the help of God was able to overcome them.

Being able to listen to oneself means that we are not afraid of being alone. So often which we are engaged in such a frenzied round of activities which can be a means of escaping our inner longings.

Our Christian faith says, however, “Do not run, but take to attentively to your own struggle. Enter into your own experience. Get to know yourself by listening to yourself as well as having others listen to you.

Sometimes I wonder if the fact that so many people ask support, advice and counsel from so many other people is not in large part due to their having lost contact with their own innermost self. Certainly, we have to check with others from time to time, but it cannot be at the expense of not listening to ourselves.

Listening to ourselves means also learning to listen to our bodies. In a book entitled, “The Voice of Illness,” the author stresses the importance of paying attention particularly to what our bodies and our illnesses are telling us about ourselves.

We all know that the body speaks a very basic language. Our expressive gestures, the color of our skin, the behavior of our heart, and our stomach and digestive system all tell us important things about ourselves, our feelings, our reactions.

Today we hear a lot about “bio-feedback” which is simply a method of using machines to help us monitor a number of body responses. This is of course what the polygraph or lie-detector does, it reads the body directly.

The body always expresses the soul or spirit of a person, and it does this in illness as much as in health. It can even be said that illness expresses the soul more impressively than health in the same way that a good cari-cature expresses essential aspects of a person more clearly than photographs taken in uncharacteristic situations.

The point is — pay attention to your illnesses; it’s one very important way of listening to yourself. Your illnesses may be telling you about ruptured personal relationships, loneliness, or some other disappointment or worry in your life.

As we learn more about what illnesses are saying we may one day hear a commercial which says: “What do doctors recommend? In a recent survey, three out of four doctors recommended a restored human relationship, or a group of loving concerning, listening, persons where one can be himself or herself, as remedies for colds, nagging backaches, and headaches.”

Listening to ourselves is difficult partly because we don’t always like what we hear or what we find within ourselves. It also takes a rigorous honesty for lying and self-deception are built into us deeply.

By listening to ourselves we can learn some fascinating things. While talking to a wise and experienced university professor some time ago, he said with a certain melancholy in his voice. . . “You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”

3. The third part of Christian listening, in addition to listening to others, listening to ourselves is learning to listen to God.

God speaks to us in a number of ways — through events or through other persons. God spoke and still speaks through the person of Jesus Christ, his teachings, his life, his death, and resurrection. God speaks through the Bible when we read and study it by ourselves and with others.

And God also speaks to us in times of prayer and meditation. The problem, however, with most of our prayers is that we do all the talking and not much listening. Our prayers give the impression that we need to instruct God on what we are doing.

The first step to listening to God in prayer is for us to be quiet. Find a quiet place where you can be alone and undisturbed. Settle down and relax and say something like, “Be still and know that I am God.”

The second step is surrender or abandonment of yourself to God. It helps to visualize the placing of yourself into God’s presence or visualize God’s presence as surrounding you totally. Another part of surrender or abandonment is to say to yourself and to God, “I accept your will, even though I am now always sure of what it is.” God’s will often unfolds in our lives from moment to moment and we cannot always know it in advance. Ordinarily we all mixed up about the will of God because we are straining to know it either in advance or in retrospect. We want to know what it is going to be two weeks from now or tomorrow or five minutes from now.

Rather we are to practice the presence of God from moment to moment and then more and more we will hear what God is saying to us from moment to moment. This does not mean an absence of trouble or pain, but rather the power to come through whatever happens to us so that God’s ultimate will may be accomplished.

So, Jesus Christ says to all of us on this Mother’s Day -- “Listen!” Listen carefully to others, learn to listen to yourself and practice listening to God. God wants us to be good listeners, to be like the good soil in the parable, which received the seed so that it grew and brought for grain. Amen.