Sunday, August 6, 1989
THE LISTENING EAR
Mark 4:1-9

Frequently, Jesus began a parable or one of his teaching sessions with the word, “Listen!” And then, to emphasize the importance of hearing or listening, at the end of the story, as in the case of the parable of the sower just read, he would add, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.” It was his way of saying, “Pay attention to what is being said.” “Be an active listener,” is how we would say it today. Listen for the inner meaning.

Jesus knew that people then and now are often too busy to stop and listen. And we also have a tendency to hear only what we want to hear and are deaf to what we do not want to hear. Thus, we sometimes miss some of the most important things others are trying to tell us, and we also miss hearing what God is trying to say to us.

So today, we’re going to talk about the human ear, about the need to listen carefully to our spouses if we are married, to our children if we have them, to our friends and neighbors, to the poor and homeless who live among us, and even to our enemies and those who are different from us. We are also going to talk about how to listen to our inner selves, and how to listen to God.

Here’s a story about a young person who had been in the courts, was listed as a juvenile delinquent, and wrote a letter to his parents thanking them for all they had done for him, but also disclosing his great pain because they hadn’t listened to him:

Dear Folks:

Thank you for everything, but I am going to Chicago 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 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 and needed to talk about them, 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 something, 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

In this sermon, what I am calling "Christ-like Listening" can be seen as having at least three components:

1. Listening with Understanding

The first component is illustrated by this letter from the young man to his parents — the need for listening with understanding, or as we call it today, "Active Listening."

A parent told me that this past summer, his teenage daughter came home about an hour late. He was angry that she had violated what he considered to be a rather liberal curfew for a young woman of her age. As she started to explain her lateness, he was about to reprimand her. He decided, however, to truly listen to her explanation. When she had finished, he understood the predicament she had found herself in when she tried to get a ride home at the right time. He said little but listened a lot. A few days later, she spontaneously kissed him and said, "Thanks a lot for understanding what happened a couple of nights ago."

Recently, a person said to me, "Well, I may not know a lot, but at least I'm a good listener." Yet it is frequently the case that an individual who prides herself on being a good listener may be a passive listener and not an active one.

A dog is a good passive listener. She fixes those big brown sympathetic eyes upon you and lets you pour out your woes, sometimes even licking your hand during your recital. But I don't know very many people who have solved their problems by having a one-way seminar with a dog.

It has been said that good bartenders are superlative passive listeners. They know when to put in the knowing "ah," the approving "how true," and the consoling, "that's life for you," without having any idea of what the conversation is all about. A person has to be pretty drunk to believe that he or she is achieving any real communication across the bar.

Listening to others or being listened to, if it is to be helpful, needs to be active, discriminating listening. It means hearing not only the words, but experiencing the feelings, the pain, or the joy behind the words. We also need listeners who know how and when to break in with "Are you sure that's the way it is?" or "What do you mean by that statement?" These are the 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 to hear us, 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 bores who always talk about themselves) is sensitive to expression, to tone and color and inflection in human speech. Jesus was a good talker and a good listener.

Good talkers are also those people who are open and honest about their own feelings, which tends to help others to be open and honest in expressing themselves. To help others be good listeners, I believe we have the responsibility to express ourselves clearly, to say what we mean.

I remember years ago in the first parish I served, a church member was very upset with me — about what I can't remember, but instead of saying to me, "I'm upset with you" and giving me the reason, she said to me, "I'm quitting the church." Maybe that opening was only to get my attention, and she certainly got it, but it would have been easier for both of us if we could've dealt with the matter straight out.

So the first part of Christ-like listening is to listen with understanding to others, and that includes listening to our enemies. Sometimes they are more honest with us than our friends.

2. Listening to Our Inner Selves

The second part of listening is that of learning to listen to our inner selves. Too often, we run away from ourselves and don't pay attention to the messages that come from within us and from our bodies. Jesus 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 carefully 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. The fact that we are engaged in such a frenzied round of activities can be a means of escaping our inner longings or the messages that are trying to get through to us from our inner selves.

Our Christian faith says, "Do not run from yourself, but take time to be quiet and alone with yourself." Listen attentively to your own inner struggle. Enter into your own experience. Get to know yourself by listening to yourself, in addition to having others listen carefully to you. Try to discern what God is saying to you through your own inner spirit.

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 physical aches and pains 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, and our relationships.

Years ago in another city, I visited a young woman who was a church member and in the hospital with severe abdominal pains. She was checked for appendicitis, for stomach ulcers, and a variety of intestinal problems. All tests were negative. In our conversation, I asked her what had been going on in her life in the past several months, and she told the story of a break-up with her fiancé. And when I asked her what she had been eating and she told me, I thought that my stomach would've been in pain also. There was nothing physically wrong with her, but her body was giving her some strong messages.

Listen to your body. The body expresses the soul or spirit of a person, and it does this in illness as much as in good health. It can even be said that illness expresses the soul more

dramatically than health, in the same way that a good caricature expresses essential aspects of a person more clearly than photographs taken in uncharacteristic situations.

Pay attention to your illnesses and to your aches and pains. It's one way of listening to yourself. 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, listening to God, and becoming part of a group of loving, listening, caring people, as remedies for colds and nagging aches and pains."

3. Listening to God

Thirdly, when Jesus said, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear," he was reminding us not only to listen to others and to ourselves, but also to listen to God. Now the fact is, of course, that by listening carefully to others, including our enemies and those who are different from us, and by paying attention to our inner selves, we are already listening to God.

But we can hear God in other ways as well. It is no surprise that the Bible uses hearing, not seeing, as the predominant image or metaphor for the way human beings know and experience God. The Bible never speaks of people seeing God, but it is filled with stories of people hearing God, beginning all the way back in the book of Genesis with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Think of it this way. If I can't see you for some reason, but can only hear you, you don't exist for me in space, which is where seeing happens. When I only have the sound of you to go by, I don't experience you as an object the way I would if you stood before me — something I can walk around, look at from all angles. In only hearing you, I experience you more like the way I experience the beating of my own heart or the flow of my thoughts.

Now of course, we don't hear God through our ears in the same way we might hear another person's voice, except of course, as I mentioned earlier, God sometimes speaks to us through others. Part of the mystery of the preaching of sermons is that God speaks to you through the words of the preacher.

God speaks to us through hearing the Bible read and through our own reading and study of the Bible. But God also speaks to us through silence, through our inner being, and through our dreams, our insights, and our visions.

"Listen," said Jesus, "to those who have ears to hear, let them hear." Listen not only with your ears, but with your whole self — listen to others, to yourself, and to God. Then we will be like the good soil in the parable, which received the seed of the word of God so that it grew and brought forth grain. Amen.