Sunday, September 8, 1991
HEARING FROM THE INSIDE OUT (No. 2 in a Series: Living from the Inside Out)
Mark 7:31-37

Sometimes it happens when I am preparing sermons that I discover I have begun a sermon series without realizing it at first. It wasn't until I began studying the Bible passage and doing the research for this week's sermon that I became aware it was another application of the basic principle that formed the foundation of last week's sermon.

For those who didn't hear that sermon or have forgotten, the title was "Inside Out," and the theme was Jesus' suggestion that if we are to know and follow God's will in our lives, and if we want our lives to be filled with strength, joy, and creativity, we need to live our lives from the inside out. This is especially true in our time, when there is such a strong emphasis on the outside of a person — on image, appearance, status, and personality. Living from the inside out means putting basic inner character first and image second. Too often, we have it reversed. Jesus always paid more attention to the inside of a person rather than the outside. He knew that some people put on a good front but are rotten on the inside. We need to look at people first on the inside and then on the outside.

Living from the inside out is also important in hearing and understanding what others are saying. Hearing is more than the physical act of receiving sounds in our ears and having those sounds transmitted to the brain. When Jesus said that he came to give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, he meant more than restoring physical hearing capabilities.

Thus, all the stories of Jesus healing people in the New Testament have two levels of meaning — the first is the physical act of healing, but on a deeper level, the early followers of Jesus remembered these incidents because they reminded them that they too needed to have their ears opened, that they needed to hear from the inside out as well as from the outside in. We can have good hearing but be spiritually deaf. We can have good hearing but not hear what God is trying to say to us. We can have good hearing but not understand what others are saying. We can have good hearing but not hear the hurt and suffering of others.

Take this conversation as an example:

"Come on, son, tell me how you feel. I know it's difficult, but I'll try to understand."

"Oh, I don't know, Dad. You'd think it was stupid."

"Of course I wouldn't! You can tell me. Son, no one cares for you as much as I do. I'm only interested in your welfare. What's making you so unhappy?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, son, what is it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't like school anymore."

"What?!" you respond incredulously. "What do you mean you don't like school? And after all the sacrifices we've made for your education! Education is the foundation of your future. If you'd apply yourself like your older sister does, you'd do better, and then you'd like school.

Time and time again, we've told you to settle down. You've got the ability, but you don't apply yourself. Try harder. Get a positive attitude about it… Now go ahead. Tell me how you feel."

But the son has nothing more to say. He's afraid to tell his dad what's behind his dislike of school.

Do you recognize that conversation? Like this dad, do you find yourself having the tendency to rush in and fix things with good advice? Or do you listen to the feelings under the words and seek first to understand, then to be understood?

Each one of us spends a lot of time learning how to read, write, and speak, but most of us have little if any training in learning how to listen — especially how to listen deeply from the inside so that we can truly understand another human being from that individual's own frame of reference.

Isn't it true that most of us do not listen with the intent to understand, but we listen with the intent to reply? We don't try to understand the other person from the inside out; instead, we impose our pattern of thinking on that person and then interpret what he or she is saying through our pattern. We read our autobiography into other people's lives.

For example, we sometimes say too quickly, "I know exactly how you feel. I went through the same thing. Let me tell you about my experience." When we do this, or when someone does it to us, we're projecting our own understanding onto another person's experience, rather than trying to understand that person's experience from the inside out.

In his book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey reports this conversation with another man:

A father said, "I can't understand my son. He won't listen to me at all."

"Let me restate what you said," I replied. "You don't understand your son because he won't listen to you."

"That's right," he replied.

"Let me try again," I said. "You don't understand your son because he won't listen to you."

"That's what I said," he impatiently replied.

"I thought that to understand another person, you needed to listen to him," I suggested.

"Oh!" he said. There was a long pause. "Oh," he said again, as the light began to dawn. "Oh, yeah, but I do understand him. I know what he's going through. I went through the same thing myself. I guess what I don't understand is why he won't listen to me."

"This man," said Covey, "didn't have the vaguest idea of what was really going on inside his son's head. He looked into his own head and thought he saw the world, including his son."

Jesus knew that so many of us are filled with our own rightness. We always tend to hear and see things the way we are instead of the way they are. It's difficult to understand what's going on inside another human being, but it's not impossible.

From reading the New Testament, I believe Jesus was an empathetic listener. He listened with the intent of trying to understand the other person's world. He did his best to try to get inside their frame of reference.

Empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy is a form of agreement, and it is sometimes the more appropriate emotion and response. The essence of empathetic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually.

Empathetic listening involves much more than hearing, reflecting, or even understanding the words that are said. Communications experts estimate, in fact, that only 10 percent of our communication is represented by the words we say. Another 30 percent is represented by our sounds, and 60 percent by our body language. In empathetic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behavior. It's truly listening from the inside out. You try to get inside the other person so as to experience the world as he or she is experiencing it.

Now let's replay that earlier conversation between a father and son where the son told his dad he didn't like school anymore. But now the dad is listening from the inside out:

Dad: "Come on, son, tell me how you feel. I know it's difficult, but I'll try to understand."

Son: "I don't know, Dad. You'd think it was stupid, but the fact is I don't like school anymore."

Dad: "I've noticed you've been feeling frustrated with school."

Son: "I sure am. It's totally impractical. I'm not getting a thing out of it."

Dad: "I guess you feel like school's not doing you any good."

Son: "That's right, and more than that, I'm beginning to feel like a failure. I took this test today, this reading test. And, Dad, they said I'm reading on a fourth-grade level. Fourth grade, and I'm a junior in high school. I'm afraid I'm going to flunk, so I guess if I figure I'm going to flunk, I might as well quit, but I don't really want to quit. What do you think I should do, Dad?"

Do you see what's happened? By not rushing in and giving his son a lecture as soon as he said he didn't like school anymore, and instead trying to understand what was going on inside his son's life, a new opportunity was opened up for the son and his dad to talk together about some possible solution to the problem.

Jesus knew that when our hearing is from the inside out, some remarkable things begin to happen to us and to those people we have listened to with empathy. The first thing that happens is this: the more you deeply understand other people, the more you will appreciate them, the more reverent you will feel about them. To touch the soul of another human being is to walk on holy ground.

The second thing that will happen is that the more you are able to hear others from the inside out, the more you will be able to hear God in your life. Listening to people from the inside out is good practice for listening to God. All listening from the inside out takes time and patience.

Other people do not always reveal their inner selves to us on our schedules or timetables. We have to learn not to be pushy. The same is true in our listening to God.

But, you say, how can we even partially get inside the mind of God and begin to understand the world as God understands it? We cannot completely do that, of course. But we can put aside some of our images of God that block our hearing and let God be God instead of imposing our frame of reference on God.

Furthermore, we know a lot of what God is like because of Jesus. In the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, we are told, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.”

Listen to Jesus, and you are hearing God. His teachings are what God is saying to us. The way Jesus loved people is the way God loves us. Notice how he treated people, how he listened to them. That’s how God treats us, and that’s how we are to treat people and listen to them.

And 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.

Think of it this way: If I can’t see you for some reason but can only hear you, you don’t exist 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 in which I experience the beating of my own heart or the flow of my thoughts.

We don’t hear God through our ears in the same way we might hear another person’s voice, except, of course, that God sometimes speaks to us through another person. Part of the mystery of preaching is that God speaks to you through the words of the preacher.

God also speaks to us through hearing the Bible read and through our own reading and study of the Bible. And God also speaks to us through silence, especially when we take time out for prayer. In addition, God speaks to us through our inner being, through our dreams, our insights, and our visions.

There is one thing that is the same for hearing what God is trying to say to us and in hearing what another human being is saying to us: we need to get our own preconceptions out of the way. It’s hearing from the inside out.

The time you spend to deeply understand other people, especially those close to you, and the time you spend listening to God will bring dividends to your life that you can’t even imagine.

Each one of us can be healed of our deafness by working at hearing from the inside out. Amen.