Sunday, September 7, 1997
HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR HEARING
Mark 7:31-37

Even though your hearing may not be markedly impaired, you've probably had someone say to you, "You didn't hear a word I said."

That's because hearing is more than the physical act of receiving sounds in our ears and then having those sounds transmitted to our brains. Hearing and understanding can be two different things. When Jesus said that He came to give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, He meant more than restoring physical sight and hearing.

That's why all the stories of Jesus healing people in the New Testament have two levels of meaning. The first is the physical act of healing, and on a deeper level, the early followers of Jesus remembered these incidents because the healings reminded them that they, too, needed to have their eyes opened and their hearing unstopped in ways that went beyond the physical.

The same is true for us. Children can have good hearing but pay little attention to what their parents are saying. Some children become "mommy and daddy deaf." Parents can have good hearing and yet not understand what their children are trying to tell them. Parents can become "child deaf."

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, Dad, 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, you'd do better, and then you'd like school. Time and time again, we 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 now afraid to tell his dad what's really behind his dislike of school.

Instead of trying to understand what his son is saying, this dad wants to rush in and fix things with good advice.

In a marriage, husbands and wives can become partially or mostly deaf to each other.

More than thirty years ago, when I was the minister of a congregation in St. Louis, we had a dedicated group of couples that agreed to meet together one evening a week for a year. Our purpose was threefold: to learn and experience more about God, to learn better how to relate to others, and to come to know our inner selves. Each week we agreed to participate in some experiment based on one of these three goals and then report what had happened in the next meeting.

One week, the assignment was to tell your spouse what your personal dreams and goals were, and then each spouse would report to the group what the other had said. As the leader who designed the assignment each week, this one seemed harmless enough, so I was unprepared for the explosion that occurred with one couple. After the husband reported to the group what his wife had told him about her dreams and goals for their life and marriage, she said, “You didn’t hear a word I said. In fact, you haven’t heard a word I’ve said during the last five years of our marriage.” It took the rest of the evening to sort everything out and regain some sense of trust in the group.

Communication is always a two-way street. There are times when we do not clearly say what we mean and can be easily misinterpreted. There are other times when we do not hear what is said, even though the person has spoken as plainly as possible. Sometimes we don’t want to hear what is being said. At other times, we misinterpret what is being said because of our own preconceptions and don’t check to see if we’ve heard correctly.

It has been said that frequently we listen not with the intent to understand, but with the intent to reply. Sometimes, too, we unconsciously impose our pattern of thinking on the person who’s talking to us and then interpret what they are saying through that pattern. We read our autobiography into someone else’s life. In his book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey shares this conversation with a man:

A father said, “I can’t understand my son. He won’t listen to me at all.” “Let me restate what you said,” Covey replied. “You don’t understand your son because he won’t listen to you.” “That’s right,” the father said. “Let me try again,” Covey replied. “You don’t understand your son because he won’t listen to you.” “That’s what I said,” the father impatiently responded. “I thought that to understand another person, you needed to listen to them,” Covey suggested. “Oh,” the father said. There was a long pause. “Oh,” he said again as the light began to dawn. “Oh, 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.”

Covey noted, “This man 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 of his son.”

I’ve also known people with little or no physical ability to hear with their ears, yet they could hear through body language and other remarkable ways. Helen Keller was both blind and deaf, yet she learned to hear through her sense of touch.

Some of us also have difficulty hearing ourselves. We can have good physical hearing but not listen to our inner selves or what our body is trying to tell us.

We can have good hearing but be spiritually deaf, not hearing what God is trying to say to us.

Jesus knew that so many of us are filled with our own rightness, and we tend to hear and see things the way we are, not the way they are. It can be difficult to hear and understand what’s going on inside another person, but it’s not impossible. We can all improve our hearing of others, ourselves, and God.

From reading the New Testament, I believe Jesus was an empathetic listener. He listened with the intent to understand the other person’s world. He did His best to get inside their frame of reference. He also knew how to listen to Himself and to God.

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

Empathetic listening involves much more than hearing or understanding words. Communication experts estimate that only 10 percent of our communication is represented by the words we say. Another 30 percent is represented by sounds, and 60 percent by body language. In empathetic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also listen with your eyes and heart. You listen and watch for feelings, for meaning. You try to get inside the other person to experience the world as they are experiencing it.

Now let's replay that earlier conversation between the father and his son, but this time, the dad has improved his hearing.

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 anything 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 reading test today, 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?"

The dad's hearing has improved because, instead of rushing in with a lecture when his son said he didn't like school anymore, he tried to understand what was going on inside his son's life. This opened the opportunity for them to talk together about possible solutions.

Jesus knew that when you work on improving your hearing with understanding, remarkable things begin to happen to you and to the individuals you listen to with empathy.

The first thing that happens is this: the more you try to deeply understand other people, the more you will appreciate them, and the more reverent you will feel toward them. To be in touch with the soul of another person is to walk on holy ground.

The second thing that happens when you improve your hearing with others is that you begin to hear what God is trying to say to you. That's because one of the ways God speaks to us is through our relationships with others. That's part of the meaning of God coming to live among us in the person of Jesus — the Incarnation.

The Bible says in the book of Hebrews, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son."

Trying to truly hear what others are saying to you is good practice for improving your hearing with God. It takes time and patience. Other people do not always reveal their inner selves to us on our schedule, and the same is true with God.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, "But how can I even begin to hear and understand what God is saying to me?" You can begin by putting aside some of your images of God that might

be blocking your hearing and letting God be God instead of imposing your frame of reference on Him.

The good news is that we know a lot about what God is like because of Jesus. Study the teachings of Jesus, and you are hearing God. The way Jesus loved people is the way God loves you. Notice how Jesus treated people and how He listened to them. That's how God treats you, and that's how you should treat and listen to others.

You can also improve your hearing of God in other ways. It's no surprise that the Bible uses hearing — not seeing — as the predominant image for the way humans 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 as an object that I can observe. Instead, I experience you as a presence.

Furthermore, we don't necessarily hear God through our ears in the same way we hear another person's voice. God sometimes speaks to us through others — our friends and even our enemies. Part of the mystery of preaching is that God can speak to you through the preacher's words.

God also speaks to us through the Bible, both in hearing it read and in our own reading and study of it. He speaks through Bible classes and especially through discussions with others about the meaning of biblical passages or stories.

God speaks to us through silence, especially when we take time for prayer. He speaks to us through our inner being — through our dreams, insights, and visions. We improve our hearing of God when we learn to listen carefully to our inner selves.

God also communicates with us through our life experiences, in both good times and bad, successes and failures. This is not to say that God directly causes those experiences, but He uses them to speak to us.

Remember above all: In these and other ways, God speaks to all of us — the good and the bad, the saint and the scoundrel. And when you begin to improve your hearing so that you better understand what God is trying to tell you, your life will become more relaxed and peaceful. Amen.