Book 34

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 ear and then having those sounds transmitted to our brain. Hearing and at the same time understanding what you are hearing can be two different things. Thus when Jesus said that he came to give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, he meant more than restoring physical seeing and physical 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 the second 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 be "child deaf."

Take this conversation as an example. "Come on

son, tell me how you feel. I knows 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 does, 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 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 in a congregation in St. Louis, we had a dedi-

cated group of couples that agreed to meet together one evening a week for one year. Our purpose was three-fold, 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 not prepared 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 her life and their marriage, she said, "You did not hear a word I said. In fact, you've not heard a word I've said during the last five years of our marriage." It took the rest of the evening to get everything sorted 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 so we can be easily misinterpreted. There are other times when we do not hear what is said by another even though that person has spoken as plainly as he or she knows how. Sometimes we do not want to hear what is being said. At other times we misinterpret what is being said because of our own preconceptions and then do 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 he or she is saying through that pattern. We read our autobiography into someone else's life.

In his book, THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE, Steve 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," 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 him," 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."

"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 of his son."

I've also known people who had little or no physical ability to hear with their ears, yet could hear

with their eyes by watching body language and possessed other ways of hearing that were remarkable. Helen Keller was both blind and deaf, yet she learned to hear through her sense of touch.

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

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

Jesus knew that so many of us are filled with our own rightness and therefore we tend to hear and see things the way we are instead of the way they are. It can be difficult to hear and under-

stand what's going on inside another human being, but it's not impossible. All of us can improve our hearing of others, of ourselves and of God.

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. He also knew how to listen to himself and to God.

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, do your best to 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 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 also listen with your eyes and your heart. You listen and watch for feeling, for meaning. You listen and watch for behavior. 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 in which the son told his dad

that he didn't like school anymore. But now 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 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?"

The dad's hearing has improved because instead of rushing in and giving his son a lecture as soon as he said he didn't like school anymore, he tried to understand what was going on inside his son's life. This opened a new opportunity for the son and his dad to talk together about some possible solution to the problem.

Jesus knew that when you work at improving your hearing with understanding, some remarkable things begin to happen to you and to the individuals you have listened 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, the more reverent you

will feel about them. To be in touch with the soul of another person is to walk on holy ground.The second thing that will happen when you improve your hearing with others, the more you will be able to hear what God is trying to say to you. That's because one way God speaks to us is through our relationships with others. That's an important part of the meaning of God coming and living among us in the person of Jesus, what theologians call the "incarnation."

The Bible says in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, "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 and it takes time and patience. Other people do not always reveal their inner selves to us on our schedules or timetables and the same is true for God.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, "But how can I even partially begin to hear and understand what God is saying to me?" You can begin by putting aside some of your images of God which might be blocking your hearing and let God be God instead of imposing your frame of reference on God.

The good news is that we know a lot of 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, how he listened to them. That's how God treats you and that's how you are to treat others and listen to them.

And you can improve your hearing of God in other ways. 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.

Furthermore we don't necessarily hear God through our ears in the same way we might hear another person's voice except of course as mentioned earlier, God sometimes speaks to us through other persons, our friends and our enemies. Part of the mystery of preaching is that God can speak to you through the words of the preacher.

God also speaks to us through our hearing the Bible read and through our own reading and study of the Bible and through Bible classes and especially our discussion of the meaning of a Biblical passage or stories with others.

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, our 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, our bad times and our good times, our failures and our successes. This is different from saying that God directly causes them.

Remember above all, in these and in other ways, God talks 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.