Sunday, September 10, 2000
HEARING DEFICIT DISORDER
Mark 7:24-37

One of my grandsons, who is now 8 years old, was born with a “hearing deficit disorder.” In the first year or two of his life, it was hardly noticeable. We thought he was late, as some children are, in learning to speak clearly. However, there were other signs that he might not be hearing sounds as he should, so various hearing tests were performed, and they confirmed that he had a rather serious hearing deficit disorder. He was fitted with a hearing aid in each ear, began working with a speech therapist, and when he was three years old, he began attending special classes for individuals with hearing problems. Now, with the continued use of hearing aids, he is understanding speech sounds, speaking clearly, and doing very well in school with those in his same age group.

It’s not that unusual. Now infants are given tests for hearing disorders automatically. Many of us, as we grow older, develop hearing problems. A few years ago, I noticed that when Jack played some of the highest notes on the pipe organ, I could no longer hear them. I also became aware that I was not hearing some words clearly, especially the consonants. A hearing test by an audiologist confirmed it, so now I have a hearing aid for each ear. When I started using them, one of the first things I did was show them to my grandson and tell him that now I was just like him. From time to time, we compare our hearing devices.

You have probably also noticed that even though your hearing is not impaired — or in my case, even when I’m wearing my hearing aids — someone will say to you or to me, “You didn’t hear a word I said.” What they mean is, “You didn’t pay attention to what I was saying,” or “You misunderstood what I was trying to tell you.”

Hearing is more than the physical act of receiving sound waves in our ears and then having those waves transmitted to our brain for interpretation. Thus, when Jesus said that he came to give sight to the blind, speech to those who had difficulty speaking, and hearing to the deaf, he meant more than restoring physical sight, speech, and hearing.

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 and retold them as types of parables. These healing incidents reminded them that they too needed to have their eyes opened, their speech corrected, and their hearing improved in ways that went beyond the physical, and that the coming of Jesus into their midst did just that. It gave them a new understanding of God and God’s relationship to them, and also how they were to relate to each other.

The same is true for us. We all need help with our hearing deficit disorders. Children can have very good physical hearing but pay little attention to what their parents and teachers are saying. Additionally, they can have excellent hearing and hear all the words correctly, but not understand the deeper concepts the words are trying to explain. Some children become “mommy” and “daddy” deaf. Parents and grandparents can have good hearing and yet not understand what their children and grandchildren are trying to tell them. Adults can be “child” deaf.

As an example, listen to this conversation: “Come on, son, tell me how you feel. I know it’s difficult, but I’ll try to understand.” “I’m not sure, 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?" "Okay, to tell you the truth, Dad, I don't like school anymore." Dad then responds, "What do you mean you don't like school? After all the sacrifices we've made on your education? Education is the foundation of your future. If you'd apply yourself like your older sister does, you would do better, and then you'd like school. I've told you over and over again 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 young man has nothing more to say. He's now reluctant 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 before he understands the issues.

With his hearing deficit disorder corrected, here's another version of the conversation: Dad says, "I know you're having difficulty with school. If you want to tell me about it, I'll try to understand." Son: "I don't know, Dad, you'd think it was stupid, but I don't like school anymore." Dad: "I've noticed that you've been frustrated with school." Son: "I sure am. It's totally impractical. I'm not getting a thing out of it." Dad: "It sounds like you think school's not doing you much good." Son: "That's right, and more than that, I'm beginning to think I'm a failure. I took this reading test today, and 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 out, so if 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 and wanted to quit, he tried to understand what was going on in his son's life. This opened a new opportunity for the son and his dad to talk together about some possible solutions to the problem.

In marriages, husbands and wives can have hearing deficit disorders. More than 30 years ago, when I was the minister in a congregation in the St. Louis area, we had a dedicated group of couples that agreed to meet together one evening a week for one 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 an assigned experiment based on one of these three goals and then report to the group 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 experiment each week, this one seemed harmless enough, so I was not prepared for the explosion that took place 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 for their life together, 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 try to get things 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, and thus what we have said 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 because it hurts too much. At other times, we misinterpret what is being said because of our own preconceptions and then do not check to see if we've heard correctly.

Sometimes, too, our hearing deficit disorders occur because we listen not with the intent to understand but with the intent to reply or to find fault or to defend ourselves. Or we can, without noticing, impose our pattern of thinking on what we are hearing and then interpret what he or she said through that pattern. We impose our autobiography on someone else's life.

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 try to restate what you said," Covey replied. "You don't understand your son because he won't listen to you." "That's right," the father answered. "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. Then Covey said, "I thought that to understand another person, you need to listen to him." "Oh," the father said. There was a long pause, and then the light began to dawn. "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 slightest idea of what was actually going on inside his son's head. He looked into his own head and thought he saw the world of his son."

Overcoming a hearing deficit disorder is more than wearing a hearing aid; it is more than hearing the sounds. I've known people who have had little or no physical ability to hear with their ears, yet could hear with their eyes by watching body language and had other ways of hearing that were remarkable. Helen Keller was both blind and deaf, yet she learned to hear through her sense of touch.

You can also have a hearing deficit disorder in hearing yourself. You can have good physical hearing and not pay attention to your inner self or to what your physical body or your soul is trying to tell you.

You can have a hearing deficit disorder in your spiritual life. You do not hear what the Holy or the Sacred within your midst is trying to tell you. That's the kind of hearing deficit disorder that Jesus was most concerned with.

He knew that many people are so filled with their own rightness that they hear and see things the way they are and not as God intended. However, I believe most people want to have their hearing deficit disorder healed. That's what the two stories from Mark's gospel, read earlier, have in common.

In the first story, there is this persistent mother who has an ill daughter. She won't give up, even though she was considered someone not worthy by those around Jesus. A Syrophoenician, she is called. She's a Philistine. Remember that bad lot from the Old Testament? According to Mark's gospel, she is one of the "dogs." It's a disparaging metaphor popular at the time for describing all gentiles. The social gap between her and the Jews is huge. She is like an illegal alien marching into the Oval Office to see the President. Or like a bag lady trying to make an appointment with Bill Gates. She doesn't have a hearing deficit disorder. She desperately wants God's healing Spirit to intervene in her daughter's life. She is convinced that Jesus has that Spirit within him.

She begs Jesus to heal her daughter, but it sounds as if he doesn't have time for her. "Let the children of Israel be fed first," he says, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." On the one hand, it's a logical answer. It was the plan of Jesus to go to the Jews

first and then to the others. So maybe he is not so much saying no to the woman as he is saying, “First things first; one thing at a time.”

Maybe he doesn’t want to dilute his mission. But does he have to use the derogatory language of the day? I don’t know the answer. I do know the woman is not going to be put off. She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. She certainly does not have a boldness deficit disorder. She said, “Even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs.” She is arguing that even on his own terms, there should be something from him, some scrap of grace for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is challenging him. “What are you going to do, teacher, judge me by the externals only? Aren’t you the one who said it is what is inside a person that counts?”

I like this bold woman. And so does Jesus. Where the traditions of the elders and the religious law could only see an outcast, Jesus sees inside her and to her deep and strong faith.

The deaf man in the second part of the story is also a kind of outcast. He is walled off from others because of his hearing deficit, which has also caused a serious speech impediment.

Jesus paid attention to both people. He was an empathetic listener. He did his best to understand the inner person. 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 with your eyes and your heart. You listen and watch for meaning, for behavior. You try to get inside the other person so as to experience the world as he or she is experiencing it.

When you hear with understanding, you are a long way toward overcoming any hearing deficit disorder you might have. There are several good side effects. The first thing that happens is that the more you try to deeply understand other people, the more you will appreciate them. You will even be in touch with the soul of some people. That can be a holy experience. The second thing that will happen is the more you become connected to others, the more you will be able to hear what the Holy is trying to tell you. Amen.