

NEW LIFE THROUGH LISTENING

James 1:17-27

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When is the last time someone really listened to you? Deeply, intensely, with great attention...when is the last time someone looked you in the eye and you had the feeling that every word coming out of your mouth was of such great interest to the other person they didn't want to miss a single thing you had to say...

It happens when we're falling in love, doesn't it? When I'm working with couples to plan their weddings, they tell me about long conversations they had when they first met, sometimes on one of their first dates, conversations that lasted into the night, conversations that continued by phone after the date was over...conversations like that are magical, and memorable. But they're also rare.

When is the last time you listened to someone with care and focus?

In our distracted world, listening is becoming a lost art. We hear one another, but we are forgetting how to listen. I'm as guilty as the next person. I find myself feeling anxious when I'm not multi-tasking. I was attending a meeting on Friday, and I was aware that I was having difficulty sitting still and listening to each person who was talking. I wanted to check my phone, I wanted to play around on my computer. I caught myself taking notes for this sermon, this sermon about listening, and realized just how ironic it was that I was choosing not to listen at that very moment.

Listening is becoming a lost art. Listening requires that we tune in to one another, that we turn off the other things that make noise and grab our attention.

If you're not sure how well you're doing at listening, or if you're not sure if you're being listened to, there's one test. People who listen are people who ask questions. If you come into my office to talk to me about something that's going on in your life, and if I'm listening in an interested and caring way, I will pepper our conversation with questions. I will ask, "Tell me more about that." Or "why do you think you responded that way?" Questions show that the other person is really attuned.

Perhaps the best synonym for listening is paying attention. Isn't that a funny phrase? To pay attention. To pay is to give away something valuable, in this case our time and our focus. If you are paying attention to me, you are spending some of your time and some of your focus. You are giving me a gift, the gift of being present with me. That's what we do when we really listen; we give one another a gift.

This morning we are lifting up the volunteers in our Stephen Ministry program; our Stephen Ministers are the designated listeners of our congregation. In order to become Stephen Ministers, 50 hours of training is involved. A lot is learned in that program - how to help people in various times of life crises, when to refer someone to a professional counselor, how to become more comfortable praying with other people, the importance of confidentiality is stressed again and again - but most of the 50 hours is spent learning the art of listening. It seems like it should be so easy, doesn't it? Just listen! But listening can be taught and the more we practice it the better we become.

An article in the Plain Dealer on Friday caught my eye. It was celebrating the extraordinary gifts of a woman who has volunteered at the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center for 30 years. The woman, named Linda Ferris, lives in Avon Lake. I don't know

her but I would like to thank her for her service. Her volunteer shift is from 10 PM to 7 AM. She says that the number of calls she gets is unpredictable. "Some nights I don't get any calls at all. Other nights it seems like I'm getting calls every half hour." The number one job of a rape crisis volunteer is...to listen. "You listen because a lot of times the caller has no one else to talk to. The caller might be having nightmares and just wants to know everything will be OK." And you feel the pain of the person on the other end of the line...

Listening is a gift to our world.

Listening is a gift to our relationships.

A man tells this story about himself. "I once found myself with too many commitments in too few days. I got nervous and tense about it. I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.' Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly. I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'"

What new life might be engendered in our relationships if we practiced listening?

And I wonder what would happen if we took more time for quiet, and created space in our lives for listening to ourselves? One of my favorite books is entitled Let Your Life Speak. It urges us to pay attention to our own lives. Rather than imitating what other people do, a deep sense of happiness comes from being our most authentic selves, learning what it is that makes us unique. Some of you heard my friend Lois Annich preach last year when I was on sabbatical. She facilitated a small group that I participated in one time called Circle of Life. She used to tell us this which I thought was so wise: “Treat your life as if it were a science experiment. Pay attention to yourself. Take field notes. Don’t judge yourself; rather, observe without judgment. Notice what makes you feel most alive. Notice the direction God is nudging your life.”

I have to wonder how many people would avoid trouble and scandal if they listened more and talked less? Look at what happened this week to Donald Sterling of the Los Angeles Clippers. I’m thrilled that such a loud and public statement has been made by the NBA commissioner, proclaiming to everyone that racism and bigotry are no longer to be tolerated in American society. But what if Donald Sterling had been urged, somewhere along the way, to be a person who listens as well as talks? What if he had read the book of James where we’re instructed to be “quick to listen but slow to speak”? How might he have turned out differently? What if, at least, someone had said to himself, “Would you listen to yourself?” How many times do our words get us in trouble? Listening is a gift to ourselves.

Listening enhances our relationships, it makes a difference for good in our world, it helps us become the people God created us to be, and listening is the way we hear

God speak. If we don't create those places and times for quiet in our lives, the voice of God will be drowned out by the sounds that fill our environment.

Psalm 46 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." Is it any wonder that many people feel closest to God in nature? That's when we're least distracted. Cell phones and ipods can go everywhere, of course, but few people are tweeting while mountain-climbing, certainly not while snorkeling, probably not while fishing. Cell phone reception is only so good when you're hiking in the woods.

One of the slogans of the United Church of Christ says, "God is still speaking." It's good news but we won't know what God is saying until we listen.