

Second Sunday Ordinary Time

January 17-18, 2015

Readings: 1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19; 1 Cor. 6:13-15, 17-20; John 1:35-42

“You’re not listening.” I suspect that we have all been told this from time to time, and if we are honest, we’ll admit that the criticism is true. Listening is difficult, requiring concentration to be sure. But part of the problem in listening for so many people, is not centered on a lack of desire to listen. Rather, there are three main factors that contribute to this situation.

First, our minds are cluttered with so many other things, concerns, worries, that we can never really get away from any of it. If my mind wanders during Mass, it is not likely because I am thinking about a summer vacation six months away, but rather because I realize that I forgot to answer that e-mail or confirm that appointment, or send in my estimated tax payments or a host of other things.

Secondly, some of our own sporting venues have made normal human interaction extremely difficult, if not in some cases virtually impossible. The very second that a referee’s whistle blows in the NBA or a linesman calls for a stoppage of play in the NHL, we are immediately bombarded by video screens projecting 19X 37 foot images and speakers blaring. Tomorrow’s (Today’s) NFC Championship Game at the stadium in Seattle may well break another record, with a noise level of over 137 decibels. That is as loud as listening to a jet engine 100 feet away without any earplugs!

Thirdly, our attention spans have gradually shrunk to the point that the effort required for quiet listening has become a lost art. We do not teach our young people to listen, but quickly fill up any dead space. “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” Really- are we really capable of listening anymore?

Why does God choose to speak in whispers? At times, God spoke in other ways, sometimes through other signs, some of which were quite extraordinary. But by definition, the ordinary means are not going to knock us off our chairs. He speaks in muffled whispers because that necessitates that we first step back, slow down, quite down and listen. In the silence of our hearts, a voice can be discerned.

Listening is intentional, it is a deliberate decision and requires an action on our part. There is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is simply the act of perceiving sound by the ear. Listening requires concentration so that your brain processes meaning from words and sentences. Hearing happens as long as our body has functioning organs for this purpose. The difference may be found in one word- attention. Are you hard of hearing or hard of listening?

Have you ever wondered why you can hear your name across a crowded room filled with people speaking? Picking out speech isn't just a response to sounds in your environment, it's also your brain picking out the parts of the sounds that make them relevant to you as speech, and words that you have been trained to recognize.

So, if we are taught to recognize God's voice in the silence of our hearts, we will recognize it when we hear it. All the great saints said that the key to the growth in the spiritual life is in listening.

A neuroscientist wrote a fascinating article I retrieved online from the New York Times about the difference between hearing and listening.

"You never listen" is not just the complaint of a problematic relationship, it has also become an epidemic in a world that is exchanging convenience for content, speed for meaning. The

richness of life doesn't lie in the loudness and the beat, but in the timbres and the variations that you can discern if you simply pay attention.¹

Every single one of us has a vocation, a calling. The fundamental question becomes, "To what is God calling me?" We in the Church must not only encourage our youth and young adults to listen to the voice of God, but also to be open to the vocation that God has in mind for us.

For those who have discerned their vocation, our daily spiritual growth is affected by how we hear God leading us. St. Therese of Lisieux, in her autobiography sums it up so beautifully:

"Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct our souls. He, the Teacher of Teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard Him speak, yet I know He is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in."²

Let us, like Samuel, listen more closely to the Lord. And may God also be persistent with us to keep on speaking, even when we do not listen.

¹ Seth Horowitz, The Science and Art of Listening, *New York Times*, November 9, 2012

² St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, chapter 8.