

Ears that Hear

Having inherited the gift of the gab from my Mom; having lived the life that I have; given that I have a weekly forum for talking about how life and faith intersect; and given the countless ways, big and small, that I have experienced God in my 58 years of living...I could talk pretty much endlessly about the life of faith as a Christian....really there is a LOT to talk about. Describing the Christian life, this beautiful struggle that we're studying in the current sermon series, isn't nearly as simple as some Christians try to make it out to be.

And still, if someone pressed me to name the single most significant blessing of living in the way of Jesus, I would not have to hesitate. To me, the most significant blessing of following Jesus in traveling the journey of life is that regardless of what happens to me, no matter how badly I mess up my life, no matter how desperate the situation, in loss, in grief, in tragedy, in illness...in whatever circumstance I find myself... I can trust God to show me the way through that circumstance and to show me the next steps.

Now you'll notice this doesn't insure that I don't experience suffering, or loss, or hardship. And at some point, perhaps sooner than later the way beyond a particular crisis may lead me into the next life. But the point is, I am never alone.

Jesus set it up just before he ascended into heaven. He told his disciples that he needed to shed his earthly body so that he could be present for them in a more significant way; so that through his Spirit, he could be available to guide and direct, sustain them in every moment of every day wherever they were. WOW! That's HUGE! That's REALLY good news!

The bad news might be obvious...especially for us moderns. If the physical, human, on earth Jesus is standing before me I have a force with which to reckon...His presence provides access, accountability, perhaps a clarity. But a Spirit? How do I deal with a spirit? How do I know when the Spirit is speaking to me?

Those aren't just relevant questions...they are critically important questions. God, available to us through Jesus in the form of the Holy Spirit, characterizes the kind of relationship God wants with us. Authentic Christianity is a journey....a supernatural journey with a living, dynamic communicating God. But that will do little good if we do not have ears with which to hear what the spirit is communicating.

Jesus spoke of this concern long before he told his disciples about his plan to be present in the form of the Holy Spirit. He spoke of it in a familiar illustration found in Luke's gospel, the eighth chapter, verse 16-18.

(Read Luke 8: 16-18 – NRSV)

This text is most often used as an illustration regarding the need to be bold in proclaiming the wonderful truths of the gospel. Peterson translates verse 17, "We're not keeping secrets; we're telling them. We're not hiding things; we're bringing everything out into the open." But Jesus' instruction to the disciple wasn't focused on proclaiming and telling. His instruction to the disciples comes in verse 18, "Therefore consider carefully how you listen!"

The Greek phrase that is translated "consider carefully" means "to watch" or "to take care," or "to give the matter serious attention". The term translated "how you listen" addresses the way we hear. Put together, these words mean that we should be *thoughtful* regarding how we hear; it should be no haphazard process. There should be a considered effort to tune in – an effort that should address not just whether or not we hear; but in what manner, in what state, and in what frame of mind.

In regard to the topic of tuning into what God has for us, Jesus points out that if we fail to listen, or if we listen in the wrong way, we become spiritually deaf, we miss out... even what we think we know can be taken away. But if we approach hearing from God with care and thoughtfulness and diligence, Jesus says we'll be blessed with new understanding. The transformation of the beautiful struggle will take hold and we'll hear with new ears....and greater understanding.

So how can we hear with new ears so that we reap the benefits of Jesus' presence through the Holy Spirit? Or maybe we should begin by talking about some of the reasons we don't hear with new ears and greater understanding. Three things come to mind.

First, we don't listen expecting to hear from God. Most often, the leadings we get from the Spirit are very subtle. There isn't usually a knock at the door, whistles and bells, no messages on the television screen. In my experience, those leadings come as unexpected thoughts, a gentle nudge, a quiet leading inside my head and heart, a gnawing, persistent urging.

With no expectation that we are going to hear from God...it is doubtful we would ever pick up on the subtle leadings that come our way. With no expectation that God speaks to us, everything will be written off as a coincidence, or a thought influenced by what someone said early, or a bad dream, or the food we had for supper.

The second reason we don't hear with new ears is that our lives are so filled with noise and activity that there isn't a moment or even a possibility of hearing the still small voice.

From the moment our feet hit the floor in the morning, until we drop exhausted into bed at night, for many of us there is no let up in activity. We literally do not stop running all day. What is more, from the time our radio-alarm goes off in the morning, until we fall asleep to the sound of the television in our bedroom at night there are virtually no moments of silence. Even when we pause during the day, long enough to pray without some real intentionality, we do all the talking and almost no listening in that prayer ...again, because we don't really expect God to have anything to say to us in our prayer time.

People who are really interested in hearing from God must discipline themselves to be still before God. And I'm not suggesting that the only way to do that is to have a designated time and place every day for prayer, though that certainly does increase the possibility of hearing from God.

Think about your day. When do you turn off the TV, radio, the CD player or iPod and listen to nothing louder than the refrigerator's hum? When do you turn off the sound track of your mind and come away from the numbers, machines, words, schemes or whatever it is that occupies your waking thoughts? When do you make yourself quiet and available to God? As I said a moment ago, I believe this requires scheduling time for stillness each day; otherwise, it will probably not happen.

Perhaps for you, that will just mean being intentional about choosing to eat your breakfast in quiet reflection rather than reading the newspaper or listening to the radio or watching television. Perhaps it means driving to work in quiet, just attempting to open yourself to whatever God has for you rather than listening to the radio or CD player. Perhaps you can leave the iPod home when you run or walk on the treadmill.

Ideally, of course, finding quiet would mean setting aside a designated period of time devoted to prayer and meditation. And think of it as your daily audience with God...a time to come before God for whatever God might have for you. The important thing here is to do it in the way that will be most likely to succeed. If more than five minutes a day is unrealistic to start with...just do five minutes. If you need to do five minutes three times a week, then do it. God will bless these designated times.

In addition to carving out time to listen to God, we also need to keep our ears tuned to what the spirit might say as we move through the day. One pastor told of a time when he was invited to lunch with a friend. It seemed to be just at time for a friendly chat. Part way through the meal, the pastor began to feel restless. He sensed the Holy Spirit saying, "Don't settle for surface conversation...try to go deeper." So he looked the friend in the eye and said, "Is there something going on in your life that's more important for us to talk about than winters in Cleveland?" Boom! The friend was in serious trouble, and opened up his whole life to his pastor.

A third reason we don't hear God's voice is that we don't do anything about it when we do. God speaks, we listen...maybe we even acknowledge to ourselves that we heard the leading, but we don't do anything about it. If we don't follow up on leadings from the Spirit, what reason does the Spirit have to continue speaking? When we receive a leading to write or call someone, or make an appointment with a person, when we feel led to give some money, or to respond to an invitation to service...OR when we feel led to *pass* on an opportunity, or stop some worthwhile thing we're doing....often, if we take time to analyze, or evaluate it from a worldly perspective we'll end up ignoring the leading.

I'm trying more and more to follow a leading when it comes to me, even when it doesn't make sense, even when it comes at a bad time, even when it will be difficult or defy conventional wisdom, recognizing that God knows better than I do. To the extent that I'm successful, I've been amazed to think what I would have missed had I not followed through.

A very recent example; Friday was the end of a very long and physically exhausting week. I finished teaching my classes at Vacation Bible School, participated in the closing session and stopped in at the pizza party, then went to my office. I had planned to answer e-mails and work on my sermon. As the afternoon wore on I felt a leading to go see Jeff Fox. I really wanted and needed to work on the sermon; I had been to see Jeff two days before and Mike Skerritt had reported on his visit with him the day before. But the leading persisted, so I went. He was in grave condition, but much more responsive on Friday than he had been the last time I saw him; our conversation was rich. I marveled at his ability to remain optimistic in the face of all that was happening to him. He held tightly to my hand as I prayed for him. It was such a nice visit. And, it turned out to be the last time we would ever speak to each other in this life. How glad I am I didn't ignore the leading.

So if we can address some of these reasons we DON'T hear from God...how do we know, when we do, if a leading is actually the Spirit speaking to us? For today I'm just going to suggest two criteria very closely related to each other, that I think are really important.

First....no leading of the Holy Spirit would be contrary to the teachings of Jesus. The surest way to test the source of a leading is to check it against the teachings of the one who now resides with us as the Holy Spirit. If a leading is a contradiction to Jesus' teachings, then it is not a leading of the Spirit.

Secondly, God's leadings usually involve servanthood: In our materialistic and affluent society this is the one that is most often ignored. Not every leading from God will involve sacrifice and pain, but the One who did not even have a home to call his own, who amassed no material wealth, who warned continuously and vehemently of the dangers of greed and money and wealth is not likely to be setting us on a pathway to acquire those things.

Look at Jesus' relationship to his followers. He called them to humble themselves, to serve, encourage, forgive, and give sacrificially. Leadings from the Spirit are likely to be directed toward others as well.

In our text for this morning, Jesus points out that if we fail to listen, or if we listen in the wrong way, we become spiritually deaf, we miss out, even what we think we know can be taken away. But if we approach hearing from God with care and thoughtfulness and diligence, Jesus says we'll be blessed with new understanding. The transformation of the beautiful struggle will take hold and we will hear with new ears....and greater understanding.

Here is a final example: A few years ago, after a particularly exhausting meeting, Pastor / Writer Bill Hybels got into his car and drove out of the church parking lot onto the exit road. As he started down the road, out of the corner of his eye he saw someone walking toward the parking area. In that fraction of a second he received what he thought was a leading from God --- to go offer some form of assistance to the person he had just passed. His initial response was "Why?" The person didn't seem to be having any difficulty. His second response was "Why me?" He'd already done his share that day, studying, working on a sermon, counseling with people, and then leading a meeting. He wanted to go home. And so he kept driving; rationalizing his disobedience. But the Holy Spirit persisted. By the time he had reached the entrance sign, he felt so restless in his spirit that he thought, "Not following this leading is causing more stress than simply turning around and obeying, even if I'm tired and don't know why I'm supposed to do this." So he headed back down the entrance road, pulled up alongside the person who was still heading south, rolled his window down, and awkwardly said, "Is there any way I can serve you? Could I drive you to your car?"

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The woman, whom Bill had never seen before, gladly accepted his offer. Just as she was about to thank Bill and get out of the car, she said, "There was an announcement in the bulletin tonight about the

need for administrative help in the church office, I've been feeling God leading me to apply for that position. What do you think? They discussed the matter briefly, and they each drove off. That night Bill had no idea how offering help to a person who probably didn't need it would affect his life and ministry. As it turned out, the woman joined his staff and now serves as his full-time administrative assistant. Bill writes, "Without her unique combination of skills and gifts, I could not do what God has called me to do. I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't obeyed that leading."

To me, the most significant blessing of following Jesus in traveling the journey of life is that regardless of what happens to me; no matter how badly I mess up my life; no matter how desperate the situation; in loss, in grief, in tragedy, in illness...in whatever circumstance I find myself... I can trust God to show me the way through that circumstance; to show me the next steps.

In spite of my busy life and overfunctioning, my inability to stop my mind from racing and still my heart, or carve out the kind of quiet time that I want and need; still, mostly through gentle nudges, sudden realizations, quiet or persistent thoughts, every day I receive invaluable guidance from God through the Holy Spirit in matters large and small:

- God has shown me the way through relational and vocation crises, through life threatening illness the loss of loved ones;
- Through the Holy Spirit Jesus guides me in making major life decisions, like accepting a call to pastoral ministry and deciding to leave a pastorate after 20 years and come to Cleveland, Ohio.
- God has been the guiding force in my developing, repairing and nurturing my relationship with Kay and my children and now my grandson.
- God guides me in prioritizing my day and making decisions about how and when to extend myself in matters of pastoral care.
- Every week God brings the scripture to life, guides me to ideas and illustrations in writing sermons;
- And I am depending on God to reveal a plan for the ministry of this congregation and my particular role in that plan.

The Beautiful Struggle of Christian discipleship is a journey....a supernatural journey with a living, dynamic God who is always with us....ready always to show us the way. And this remarkable, amazing gift is available to everyone who will simply pay attention to how they listen. It is available to all of us who have ears to hear. Thanks be to God!