

January 31, 2021

Texts: James 1: 19-21; 1 Samuel 3: 1-10, 19,

Title: "The Power of a Listening Heart"

Some years ago, a CEO of a large company began to lose his sense of hearing. It was becoming obvious that he couldn't hear what other people close to him were saying as he seemed to be missing crucial details of conversations. So he went to an audiologist who listened as the man described to him how his colleagues had complained that he was not hearing well. After a thorough examination, the audiologist took out an old pocket watch that he carried and placed it against the guy's ear. "Do you hear this watch ticking?" the audiologist asked. "Absolutely," said the man. The audiologist moved farther away and held the watch up. The man heard it there. The audiologist then walked into the next room and asked, "how about now?" "I still hear it," he said. He walked back into the office and put the watch back in his pocket. "This problem is quite common," he said, "especially among successful people. Your hearing is ok. You're simply not listening." Do you know anyone like that? They don't have a hearing problem. They have a listening problem.

Obviously many people have hearing problems but lets also agree that sometimes we miss things because we don't listen to one another.

This morning we read the well-known story from 1 Samuel about the young boy Samuel who is under the mentorship of the high priest, Eli. Samuel's in bed one night and he hears something and he thought it was Eli calling him. Now it says that Samuel had been studying about God, but he didn't yet know God: The word of the

Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

That's interesting, don't you think? It would kind of suggest that there may be a difference between studying about God and "knowing" God. Maybe the difference has to do with our becoming willing to listen for God's voice.

Of course, eventually, with Eli's help, Samuel did hear and respond to God. And the last verse says, "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground." In other words, Samuel who listened to God, had a lifelong relationship with God and a fruitful ministry. Friends, wonderful things happen sometimes when we're willing to listen.

But listening isn't the same as hearing. Hearing refers to the sounds that enter your ears. It is a physical process. Listening, however, requires focus and concentrated effort. Listening is a wonderful gift to give to someone, to listen to them that intently. It's really the greatest honor you can pay someone. As someone said, "An open ear is the only believable sign of an open heart."

Sometimes, when someone is speaking to us, we will get distracted and start to think about what we're going to say in reply. This means that we don't listen to the rest of what they're saying. This is a problem.

Listening to someone is a way of saying you are important to me. You matter. So many of us hunger for this.

Of course, the most important listening we can do is to listen to God. It's interesting how much time Jesus spent in prayer. Obviously he believed listening to

the voice of God was important. Now I wonder, do you ever pray for God's guidance but then you forget that you prayed and you don't remain alert to discern the guidance. I have a theory that many of us don't listen to God very well. We're just not practiced in that. We tell God some things and ask for some things but we don't remain attentive to discerning God's message back to us and so we miss out on some of life's greatest opportunities.

I read a story told by a man Doug who told about a 30-year-old insurance guy he met at a party. Doug learned that this young man, Bob, was new to the Christian faith. So he asked how things were going. Have you found a church? He asked. Yes, Bob said. Have you found a Bible Study? Yes, I have one of those too. Finally Doug asked, How are you and God getting along (a question about his prayer life)? Well Bob said he hadn't really gotten into that too much. So Doug laid out a challenge for him: to pick something to pray over every day for the next six months. The prayers could be elaborate or simple, whatever. But Bob must pray at least briefly every day. "If at the end of six months God has not done something truly significant," Doug told him, "I will then pay you \$500."

Bob accepted the challenge. He and his wife lived in a neighborhood that had a number of embassies including the nation of Kenya so he decided to pray daily for Kenya.

Not much happened for four or five months. Then one night he sat next to a woman at a dinner party. She was from Kenya. She ran a children's home. Now Bob had

been dreaming about how to spend the \$500 Doug had promised him, but suddenly he had a feeling that he would never see it. He asked to hear more about the children's home and listened to her answers for a full hour. She told Bob that no one had ever shown such interest. Would he consider flying to Kenya to see it first hand?

Long story short, Bob ended up going and becoming a major fundraiser for the children's home. It changed his life. He became so well known in Kenya that the President of Kenya invited him to meet. There Bob advocated for prisoners of conscience in that country. Later those prisoners were released. The US Secretary of State called Bob and asked him how he did it because they'd been unsuccessful in their efforts. It was no mystery to Bob how it came about. God had guided him to pray for Kenya and wonderful things were happening.

Makes me wonder. What if you and I were to pray with great regularity and at the same time, to listen to God...discern in our daily activities how God might be speaking to us about these things, we'd see wonderful things happen in our lives too.

Are we listening to the people around us--especially those closest to you? More importantly, are we listening to God? Amen.