

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Have you noticed? Everyone has a platform. Actually, it appears everyone has a variety of platforms though which to communicate. We've moved so far beyond friendly conversations between neighbors over the back fence, telephones, and even e-mails. Now we text, we tweet, we twitter every little thought that pops up in our heads. We have to be the absolutely most talkative generation that ever peopled the earth. The problem is that it seems everyone is talking at once. Who is hearing?**

**The deaf man of today's Gospel did not have the ability to hear. As a result since he could only mimic the sounds that he thought others were making when they talked, his speech was effected and he was only making mostly unintelligible noises.**

**Most of us, thank God, have the ability to hear, but how many of us are actually hearing what others are saying? Sure, many of us listen to a person, but do we really hear what the other is saying?**

**Listening is a skill. It is something that can be acquired. I don't think it is at all an exaggeration to say that you could have no greater impact on your world than by closing your lips and opening your ears. How can we become better listeners?**

**Perhaps first we should establish why it is important to become a better listener. Most marriages struggle when husbands and wives stop hearing what is really important to the other. Siblings start fighting when they are more concerned about what they want and fail to hear what their sisters and brothers need or want. When parents fail to attune their ears to the changing needs of their children as they grow older, inevitable conflicts ensue. And when growing children refuse to hear their parents right to continued respect hostilities break-out in the form of sulking, pouting, shouting, and the like that makes it impossible for anyone in the family to hear each other.**

**What is true within families is also true within communities, whether it be churches, schools, work-places, town hall meetings, or national politics. Listening is the basic skill that is necessary for people to engage each other in meaningful dialogue that is central to our humanity.**

**A story is told of a family that stopped at road-side diner. The waitress walked up and, looking at the young boy, asked, "What will it be, young man?" The boy eagerly and politely responded, "May I please have a hamburger, French fries, and a chocolate milkshake?" His mother immediately interrupted: "Oh, that's not what he wants. He'll take the roast beef, a baked potato, and a glass of milk." Much to the surprise of the mother and the boy, the waitress turned to the boy and asked, "What do you want on that hamburger?" The boy shouted back, "Ketchup, lots and lots of ketchup!" The waitress said, "That's a chocolate shake, right?" "That's right said the boy." As the waitress left**

the table, the boy turned to his parents with a big smile on his face and said, “Wow, isn’t she something! She thinks that I’m real!”

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, that’s what happens when you really start hearing people. They’re suddenly going to become real to you.

Now that we have established why it’s important to become a good listener, let’s ponder for a moment how we might improve our listening skills. The first and most important thing that we might do to improve our listening skills is to shut up. Let’s face it and be honest. We all talk too much. Why? Well, because we all want to be heard. And all too often if someone does hear us and responds to us, rather than listening to the other, we are already preparing our rejoinder to the comment made. Lots of times we even do that with God. We may pray as we read in the Book of Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for your servant listens, but what we really mean is “Listen, Lord, your servant speaks.”

My niece who teaches middle school to educationally-challenged children told me of a practice she initiates with her class every year. Every morning for five minutes she requires them to be totally quiet. That’s hard for any of us to do, but can you imagine the ingenuity it takes with any class of middle school kids? But, somehow each year she pulls it off. And she’s discovered that a great deal of good comes from these experiences of silence. After one of these quiet times she asked the children if they heard anything. One boy said, “I heard something said in my head that I should be more obedient to my parents.” Another said, “I heard something say that I should try to always be fair, like when you’re tagged and nobody sees it, you’re still out.” Silence begets better listening because the quiet voice of God’s Spirit within us opens us to what’s best in us.

Did you notice in our Gospel text that a crowd had gathered around and wanted to see Jesus be a wonder-worker. They were probably shouting, encouraging Jesus to heal the deaf mute. Instead, Jesus takes the man off away from the crowd. He wasn’t impressed by the crowd; rather he heard the man’s pain, maybe even his shame. He gently presses his finger to the man’s ear, and lovingly touches his tongue with his own spittle, looks up to heaven, groaning with the man’s pain, and says, “Ephaphata! Be opened!”

The man obviously ran back to the crowd, now able to hear and speak plainly. The people were in awe, but Jesus tells them to say nothing. Of course, they didn’t listen. In astonishment, they said, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Why did Jesus tell them not to go talking about what happened? He wanted them to be still and hear that God’s promise made thousands of years earlier through the Prophet Isaiah had just been fulfilled: “Say to those whose hearts are frightened; Be strong, fear not! Hear is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then

**will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water.”**

**To be a good listener, you have to be willing to be still so that you can really hear what the other is saying. When we do that we not only affirm the value of the other, but we are drawn into the life of the other, whether that other is a spouse or a parent or a child or a co-worker or God Himself. Good listening builds up confidence in the other so that he or she shares more and more of himself or herself that deepens not just our regard for him or her but opens us to loving the other more deeply.**

**Therefore, I suggest for your consideration this morning that though the gift of speech is a mighty gift indeed, it is somewhat over-rated. The far greater gift, the gift that opens us to others and to the Other who is God is hearing. Develop your skill of listening that you may truly understand the Scripture, “Be still, and know that I am God.” By becoming better listeners we will finally be able to fulfill the Lord’s only command to us, “Love one another. As I have loved you so are you to love one another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples—in your love for one another.”**