Sermon for Transfiguration of our Lord—Year A 2014

We Hear A Lot But Are We Listening?

Have you ever noticed this:
someone is speaking, the person spoken to says—
“I hear what you are saying.” and not
“I’m listening to what you are saying.”
Actually . . . and I think all of us are aware of this—
there really is a difference between hearing and listening.

What is hearing?
Hearing is an action in which just the sound is perceived by the ear;
it requires little (if any) concentration.
Very little or no effort is required to “hear” words that are spoken—or any other sound—
especially if your mind is occupied with other matters
or your attention is focused on something else.
Hearing is a passive process.

Listening is when you choose to actively engage
and concentrate on what you are hearing.
When you listen, you process the information
you hear into knowledge.
When you listen you do not think about anything else
or engage in any other tasks.
When you listen, you actively pay attention
and take note what the speaker is saying word by word.
You look into the feeling and meaning of every word.
Listening is an active process.

We hear something around us all the time.
For example, while you are at home,
you might hear the sound of other people talking,
the sound of cooking in the kitchen,
the sound of television . . .
the dog barking in the yard—
you get the idea.
There are a variety of sounds that we hear at work
or while we are on the road we hear the sound of traffic
or the various sounds of our car’s engine.
Throughout any given day we hear the sounds of people laughing, talking, shouting
In public, the people laughing, talking, shouting and so on.
And, at the end of the day, after we go to bed and fall asleep,
we may even hear sounds while we sleep.
All these sounds happen around us but we do not necessarily see the incidents.
They are just sound waves reaching your ears.
Hearing is an alarm system, which operates even outside of the line of sight.
This also applies to music.
Nowadays music is played everywhere, in shopping malls,
in restaurants, in supermarkets, in offices, just about everywhere.
It puts us in a situation where we just hear music of all kinds
in the same way as we hear every other noise around them.
Most of us do not truly listen to that music or gain anything from hearing it.
As someone who loves music—this is not a good thing.
We lose the chance of acquiring any skills from it
and it devalues the great gift of music in general . . . it becomes mere noise.

When you need to listen, you need to pay active and close attention so you can interpret
and respond and retain or remember what was said, what you have heard.

Social and cognitive scientists have observed that
our modern technology has impeded our ability to listen.
We hear a lot but we do not listen.
For example a common scenario at home . . .
A person is simultaneously reading something on the internet
while someone is speaking to them;
or how about a person texting on their mobile phone
while they are trying to respond to something you have just said.
We all know that the person in each of these scenarios
may be hearing but they are not listening.
And, in my house . . . and I suspect in some of yours,
such scenarios as these are generally followed later with statements like—
“See, I knew you weren’t really listening to me!”

For me, the quintessential example of non-listening happened in an episode
of TV sitcom The Nanny—any former fans out there?
Fran, the nanny, is talking with her mother on the phone.
However she walks from room to room, letting her mother talk—
not on speaker mode—
and occasionally picks up a phone extension.
Without even waiting to hear her mother’s voice let alone listen to her,
Fran says “uh-uh”, puts the phone down,
and walks to another room while flipping through a magazine or filing her nails.

We all seem to have difficulties with listening and
yet is our most important communication skill.
Studies confirm that most of us are poor and inefficient listeners.
Why should that be?
Well . . . listening is hard work!

Regardless of the difficulty, God commanded Peter, John and James then
and God commands us now to listen to his Son, the Beloved.
Faith—as we have heard so often from the New Testament letter to the Hebrews—is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. But Paul writes in Romans that

*Faith comes from what is heard [listened to]*
*and what is heard comes through the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17).

Perhaps this is why Jesus commands Peter, James and John not to tell what they have seen until after he has been raised—in the end, what they have seen—that extraordinary vision of Jesus shining brighter than the Sun conversing with Moses and Elijah—even that sight is *not as important as what they have heard. This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

*Listen to him.*

Notice that in 1st Peter, it is the voice from heaven and the message that is shared in the letter and not the vision.

If we are to hear the message of the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, then we do well not to get too caught up with the vision and take the leap of faith and *listen.*

*Listen to him.*

Just before this story in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has asks two questions of the disciples:

First, “who do the people say that I am?”

and the second, “Who do you say that I am?”

Was this Jesus’ first test of the disciple’s capacity to listen?

Have they been paying close attention?

In response, Peter makes his famous confession that regardless of whom others think Jesus to be, Peter believes that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Apparently Peter has been attending and listening. Accepting what Peter says, Jesus charges the disciples to tell no one this, and begins to teach them that it is necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die at the hands of the scribes and chief priests. But, you remember, Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him and is, in turn, severely rebuked, to the point of being called Satan! Poor Peter! Apparently—like so many of us—he stopped listening when he began to hear something he didn’t like. But Jesus knows this message is essential and he continues to talk about the cost of discipleship and what it means to follow him, speaking of self-denial and cross bearing, warning that in trying to save our lives we will only lose them, but in losing them for his sake we will find them.
After all this, three of the disciples are with Jesus to witness the mountaintop experience of all mountaintop experiences. They see Jesus in conversation with two major heroes of Israel’s faith—Moses and Elijah—one the lawgiver and the other the quintessential prophet.

Not only do these disciples see Jesus shining brightly with heavenly glory, but here, the two who have spoken for God—the law and the prophets—and they are in dialogue with Jesus.

And as Peter interrupts the conversation—
and, may I say, wouldn’t you have wanted to listen in on that dialogue?—
the cloud of God’s radiant presence that once overshadowed Moses in his mountaintop moment, descends to envelope and speak to them, saying, “Listen to him!”
Is it any wonder they collapsed, overcome by fear?
And Peter, true to form, intent on preparing a response before God or Jesus is even finished, blurts out—“It is good Lord for us to be here. Let us build booths—one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for you.”

It is a classic case of trying to fill silence with words, of feeling uncomfortable in the presence of the holy and needing somehow to safely and securely wrap the moment in words. There is no space for holy silence and wonder, as Peter plunges ahead with a well-intentioned building plan. In true human fashion, he wants to DO something, anything . . . except listen.

This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. These words, spoken from heaven the first time at Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan are now spoken again with the all-important conclusion—listen to him.

The Transfiguration of Jesus is a moment of testimony that reveals the deeper story of God’s presence in the world. We ask—who is this Jesus? What is his connection to God? The disciples have been in the presence of Jesus. They know there’s something different about him, but they’re still in the dark. Could it be that they have only been hearing Jesus speak but not listening?

While it is true that listening is hard work,
most of us are just plain out of practice.
To be sure we probably will not have
a bright cloud overshadow our church buildings
or receive a spoken divine directive
like Peter and his fellow disciples did on the mountain,
yet God does still speak to us.
What we need to do is to learn how to listen,
actively and reflectively.
Active listening is part of discipleship.
It is a way of being attentive to one another and of caring for the blessings
with which we have been entrusted.

So how might we—individually and together as a congregation—
begin to practice listening to Jesus?
The best place to begin is in prayer.

Fortunately for us, the upcoming season of Lent
is a good time to make a commitment to prayer.
And it is also an excellent time to begin to listen to one another.
In his excellent and helpful book on discipleship, Life Together,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the imperative
and importance of listening for Christians—
He writes: . . . listening can be a greater service than speaking.
Many people seek a sympathetic ear and do not find it among Christians,
because these Christians are talking even when they should be listening.
But Christians who can no longer listen to one another
will soon no longer be listening to God either,
they will always be talking even in the presence of God.
The death of the spiritual life starts here . . .

I have to wonder—is this why the Church is struggling so today?
As I observed earlier—
it seems we hear a lot but we do not listen.
We are far more like Fran the Nanny, fairly certain we’ve heard it all before.

In our modern world there is a lot to hear, but we are inefficient and poor listeners.
Actually, it seems, that not much has changed.
Even Moses and Elijah had their problems listening to God—
Moses may have heard God’s voice on many occasions
but, as those of us who just finished the wilderness wanderings bible study discovered,
he did not always listen to God.
Elijah, too, sought to hear God’s voice
and it was only when he was willing to be silent in prayer
and listen did he hear the still, small voice of God.

When we listen to one another, really hearing each other’s thoughts,
ideas, hopes, and dreams life is not the same. Real action follows the listening, and it might not be the kind of action we envisioned or find comfortable—as Jesus tried to tell the disciples when he told them about the cost of discipleship.

When we actively listen, we make space at the table and in our heart for the other. Most importantly, we make space for God to work among us and in us—which is God’s word dwelling richly in us.

One of many things that get in the way of listening is fear of what we might hear. The good news is that stepping into new space need not be terrifying nor something we should avoid. Jesus didn’t leave Peter, James, and John trembling on the ground. He came to them, offered his healing touch, and told them to “Get up and do not be afraid.”

We are not alone. We are strengthened in one another’s company, and we have the promise that wherever two or more are gathered and listening Jesus is there, as well.

In a few moments we will be singing a prayer, asking Christ to be our light. But he will not be our light—or the light of anyone else—unless we listen to him.