

Soul Stuff: “Listening for the Voice of God”
Dr. Emmett Powers, Minister of Word and Sacrament
St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Beaumont, Texas
July 22, 2018

Among the senses, listening is one of the abilities we depend on every day. Yet, we know that even those who do not have the capacity to hear with their ears still have the capacity to hear with their souls. In fact, there are people who have never heard a sound wave *per se* in their whole lives and yet are able to creatively experience a vast range of sensory interpretations around them. Interestingly, when cochlear implants are introduced to a non-hearing patient many of them can hear though the signals are not tonally the way ordinary hearing people hear. The brain can accept electronic pulses and convert them to all kinds of sounds. Amazingly, people can hear what most of us can hear, but almost in a different dimension. They hear the words, but not the exact way we hear them and then convert them to words that are symbolically equivalent to the words we hear. I think that is amazing. You can check out a website at Arizona State University where Dr. Norman is doing some incredible research associated with hearing.

Biblical writers make an earth-shattering assumption. Throughout the scriptures they assume that everyone to whom God speaks can hear, they can discern his judgements, and then choose to obey them as a matter of will. There are very few verses in scripture that directly use the word “to listen” but there are literally hundreds of verses that use the word “to hear.” In my study this past week on the subject, I learned that in most places in the Bible where hearing is mentioned with regard to deafness, or non-hearing, people the challenge is often considered a spirit or demon possession. Even Jesus, in one of his healing miracles, addressed a curious problem for a man who could not speak. There is a story in the Gospel of Mark that demonstrates Jesus’s ability to heal those who were hearing and speech challenged. I want to read it to you since it is a story that we do not hear very often:

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³²There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. ³³After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him,

"Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!").³⁵ At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear **and** the mute speak."

The miracle included two aspects. One his healing cured the man's deafness. And, two the man immediately could speak his language clearly. I would conclude that the miracles of hearing in the gospels are wonderful attestations to the compassion that Jesus had for the masses along with his divinity. I am just as amazed by the science of today that, both of which kinds of healings in themselves, are testaments to the work of God in creation, bringing hearing to physically challenged people.

But if we want to talk about the kind of hearing, or listening that relates to our souls, we must move on from the idea in scripture about those who cannot hear, to those who will not listen. The lesson today is not about the non-hearing but the non-listening. Spiritually, God has given humans the capacity to listen deeply to the universe around them, and to hear spiritually require spiritual interpretations in the soul. Think about the way in which what we hear physically around us is the source for the discernment we need for everyday living. So, to spiritual hearing is a necessity for a life of faith.

Listening in the inner self is a Christian discipline that must be developed. "Listening is our bridge to the wisdom of sacred texts and spiritual teachers. It is an essential part of the discernment process whereby we identify God's messages for us. Listening enables us to tune in to others and our inner voices of intuition and conscience. It is how we know we are part of the natural, technological, and media worlds all around us."¹ It is also the way we bridge to faith, prayer, and inner awareness of the presence of God. When we are not listening to what God is saying we are demonstrating a kind of self-centeredness that we need to confess. When we are poor listeners, we exercise a form of rejecting, with others, says Bonhoeffer. Good listening, on the other hand invites them to exist, to matter. This is true in our conversations with God as well.

The answer to whether we have ever heard God say anything to us may just depend on how well we have learned to listen for God's voice in us. There is a

¹ Brussats, Spiritual Literacy, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/20/listening> (accessed July 21, 2018).

divine voice that we can know and identify. It is the voice of an almighty God who speaks to His creation not only in perceptive words but with a perceptible voice. So, in our souls it may well be that we have heard God's voice long before we ever able to interpret God's words.

Can that be possible? In human life it is possible. Research done at the Pacific Lutheran University wanted to find out if babies before they were born could hear their mother's voice. What they found was that newborns recognize and prefer their mothers voice. "Some babies also seem soothed by noises like whirring fans and washing machines because these probably sound like what they heard in the womb. Amazingly, babies may be able to recognize their mother's voice even before birth. The study found that babies in the womb actively listen to their mother's voice during the last ten weeks of pregnancy. Then at birth they can distinguish between the sound of their native language and a foreign language, suggesting that moms are their babies' first language teachers."² If we are, indeed, the children of God, whose souls belong to God, could it not be that from our inception and throughout our lives we have the ability to discern the voice and the words of God.

Can we discern that voice, even the words of God? Seth Barnes in his book, *The Art of Listening Prayer* offers this illustration. In 1998, Allie Pohlmeier traveled with a team from Judson College to do a project in Matamoros, Mexico. As so often happens, her heart was touched by what she experienced, particularly by one family for whom her team built a home. They painted it green. Before leaving, she took a picture of herself with that family in front of the home. In the spring of 2005, she returned to Matamoros on an AIM project. One day, she asked the Lord what he wanted her to do. Then she waited and listened. Allie felt the Lord saying, "Find the green house." "But God," she said, "Matamoros is a huge place! There may be a million people living here. I have no idea where that house is—how in the world would I ever find it?" God said, "Find the green house." "But God," she said, "that's a crazy thing. I don't even know the name of the neighborhood. I have no idea what the family's name is. I'll look stupid!" God said, "Find the green house." Eventually Allie gave in, and taking the picture of the house with her, started off. She looked up and down the first street—no green house. She felt ridiculous, but knew she must obey. She saw a girl walking down the street, so she approached her. "Could you look at this picture and tell me who these people are," she said to the girl, "or where this house might be?" The girl studied the picture and slowly a

² https://www.babycenter.com/404_is-it-true-that-babies-can-recognize-their-mothers-voice-at_10323727.bc (accessed July 21, 2018).

look of amazement came to her face. “That’s me!” she exclaimed, pointing at the picture. “That’s our house! I’ll take you to it. It’s just around the corner.”

As it turned out, she was only a block away from the green house! What Allie experienced shouldn’t be unusual for those of us who listen for God’s voice. Christianity is a personal faith. God wants to talk to us. He wants to guide us, but we have to listen.”³

As a pastor I have had many, many people, so many I could not count them come to me to tell me their sincere, and often private, experiences where they heard the voice of God. Some were looking for where to live, or who to marry, or if they should make a certain decision. Others were people who found themselves in a broken relationship or a crisis. Others talked about seeing God in a dream, or hearing God speak to them before or after a surgery. God’s voice is present throughout the universe. I have no doubt. If that were not true we could not even talk about the specifics of God’s will about this or that. We could not find the hope we need to make it through some dark night. We could not have conversations about professional callings. Today, said the writer of Hebrews, listen to God, and do not harden your hearts. Jesus said, I know my sheep and they know my voice. The voice of God reverberates in our souls. The voice in the mountains has a way of finding a sounding board in our souls. If you are wanting intimacy with God, this is the place to begin. Begin patiently to work on the ways that you listen for the voice of God.

³ <https://artoflisteningprayer.com/listening-prayer-101/> (accessed July 21, 2018).