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Hearing and listening

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Sep. 9, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

While it is one thing to hear, it is quite another thing to listen. Have you ever been part of a conversation and suddenly became aware that the other person may have been hearing you, but wasn?t truly listening? Or perhaps you were the one who did not listen, who did not understand and appreciate what was being communicated.

Ordinary Time

-7

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

For some among us, listening is difficult because of a hearing impairment; this was the experience of the man featured in today?s Gospel. Unable to hear, he could not listen to Jesus; unable to listen, he could not speak. Jesus? cure of this man freed him from his solitary silence and opened his ears. Once freed, he proclaimed the wondrous healing he had known in Jesus. This nameless former deaf man bears witness this Sunday to the importance of hearing and listening to the Word that challenges us to exercise truthfulness, justice, love and service.

In his joy at being healed, the man attests to the fulfillment of the messianic hopes that were given voice by Israel (first reading). In the healing of the deaf, the blind and the lame, the Messiah would be made known, and the salvation they had so long awaited would be accomplished through him.

As Walter Brueggemann has explained, listening was a particularly freighted notion in the faith of ancient Israel (*Reverberations of Faith*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). Beyond the ordinary aspects of auditory communication, listening, as expressed in the Hebrew term *Shema?*, pertains to the covenantal relationship God initiated with Israel. Listening is not simply hearing but is the single-minded attentiveness of the covenant partners to one another. Thus, to listen means to obey and to accept with great seriousness the will and intention of the other. This attentiveness begins with what has been called the creed of Judaism, ?Listen, O Israel? (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Those called to listen are called to love with all their heart, soul and strength and to take to heart the word of God (the law), which gives life.

At each communal gathering for worship, the call to listen is renewed. The sacred texts are proclaimed and the words are heard. The presider offers a homily. But unless we also *listen* -- that is, unless we surrender to the call of the word, are willing to be transformed by the proclaimed word -- then the word has been spoken in vain.

Through the centuries, God has used a variety of ways to gain the attention of humankind. For Moses, the

burning bush was so fascinating that he could not help but listen; for the desert wanderers, a pillar of fire, a mobile cloud and occasional claps of thunder from Sinai drew them in. Through the centuries, God?s prophets were quite creative in their efforts to get people to listen; they sang, they cajoled, they told stories, they performed symbolic actions. Ultimately, God?s greatest attempt to be heard and heeded became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. In awe of this great gift, the author of 1 John proclaimed, ?What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of Life -- what we have seen and heard, we now proclaim to you, so that you may have fellowship with God and your joy may be complete? (1 John 1:1-4). Jesus is not merely a written word in a book that we can close and put away when we?d rather not listen to its message. Jesus is God?s living, breathing Word who invites us to hear and listen in a way that will transform our lives and, through us, our world.

At times, however, our listening is not keen enough or humble enough to effect the needed transformation. In those times, we stand with the deaf man and beg Jesus to lay his hand on us. We allow him to open our ears to hear the Word as it speaks to every aspect of our lives. We listen as the truth of who we are is told; we listen to our sins, our selfishness, our greed, our apathy, our laziness. But we also listen as we are told that we are loved and cherished by a God who desires communion with us. We listen as we are told that our beloved Brother and Lord has died to secure our freedom and salvation.

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