



## **Listening for God**

**Mark 7:31-37**

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*Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a person who was deaf and had a speech impediment, on whom they begged Jesus to lay his hands. Taking the person aside in private, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the person's ears, and spat and touched the person's tongue.*

*Then looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and said, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."*

*And immediately the ears were opened, the tongue was released, and the person spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.*

*They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "Jesus has done everything well; even making those who are deaf to hear and those who are mute to speak."*

Mark 7:31-37

Ernesto Siroli went to Zambia on an agricultural mission. Here is how he tells the story: "We Italians decide to teach Zambian people how to grow food. We take Italian seeds to this magnificent valley near the Zambezi River. We're going to teach the people how to grow Italian tomatoes and zucchini and, of course, the local people have absolutely no interest in doing this. So we pay them

to come and work, and sometimes they show up. We're amazed that these people, in such a fertile valley, don't have any agriculture. But instead of asking them why they aren't growing anything, we say, "Thank God we're here. Just in the nick of time to save the Zambian people from starvation."

Everything in Africa grows beautifully. We can't believe it. We're telling the Zambians, "Look how easy agriculture is."

When the tomatoes are nice and red and almost ready to pick, overnight, 200 hippos come out from the river and eat everything.

We say to the Zambians, "For the love of God, the hippos!"

The Zambians say, "Yes, that's why we have no agriculture here."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"You never asked."

Siroli says, "Even so our Italian group was more successful than either the Americans or the English since at least we fed the hippos" (Ernesto Siroli, *Ted Talk*).

The lesson he learned from this experience is that Western people patronize and paternalize. We do not listen. We treat others as inferior. We do not listen. Large groups, small groups, one on one conversations—we do not listen.

He is right. We are losing our ability to listen. We spend roughly 60 percent of our communication

time listening, but we are not good at it. We retain about 25 percent of what we hear (Julian Treasure, *Ted Talk*). Now, not you, not this sermon, but it is generally true.

Listening is making meaning from sound. It is a mental process we do not practice as much as we used to. The world is just so noisy. The volume is stuck on eleven. With so much sound around us, it is hard to listen. It is tiring to listen.

So most days we are mostly deaf. The noise that surrounds us is constant. We take refuge in headphones. We turn big, public spaces into tiny, little personal sound bubbles. The phrases spoken most often in many homes are “What?” “I can’t hear you.” “What did you say?”

We lose our capacity for real dialogue. We have become impatient. We do not listen to speeches anymore. We listen to sound bites. The art of conversation is being replaced by personal sound bites. We are so busy thinking about the next thing we will say that we do not hear what has been said.

Have you seen *Around the Horn*? It is a talk show on ESPN—four reporters and a moderator in what they call competitive banter. The moderator gives points for clever comments and takes points when he disagrees. The two lowest scoring speakers are eliminated. Then the winner of the showdown gets the prize of thirty seconds to speak without being interrupted. That show and others like it make

explicit what is usually implicit—that every conversation is a competition.

Because we do not listen to one another, we ask the wrong questions: What can I say that will sound clever? How can I refute what I do not like? Is the person I am talking to as smart as I am?

Because we do not listen, when there is music, we ask the wrong questions: Should I like this? What kind of people like this? What does it say about me if I like this?

Because we do not listen, when we hear the news, we ask the wrong questions: Does the person speaking agree with me? How is this support for my opinions? Is this something I can use?

We find it hard to pay attention to the quiet, subtle, and understated. And so the one we are least likely to hear is God. If someone ever started a sentence with, “God told me” we would roll our eyes. It does not usually occur to us that God speaks or that we should listen. We hear what we are used to hearing, and we do not expect to hear from God. Losing our ability to listen is a serious problem, because listening is the way we understand. A world where we do not listen is a scary place.

We seem to be losing our ability to listen, but it is also true that people have been lousy listeners for a long time. Jesus was frustrated with people who do not listen. In the Gospels, Jesus asks them to listen eighteen times. Earlier in Mark 7, Jesus says,

“Listen to me, all of you, and understand.” In the next chapter, Mark 8, Jesus asks, “Do you have ears and fail to hear?” The answer is, “Yes. We have ears and fail to hear.”

Jesus’ heart breaks that they are not listening, because he knows their lives could be better if they learned to listen. On this occasion Jesus is in Gentile territory when they bring a deaf person to him. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. He puts his hands on the man’s ears to let him know that Jesus knows what the problem is. Jesus takes spit—which they believed had healing powers—and touches the man’s tongue. He speaks the Aramaic word, *Ephphatha*, “Be opened” and the man hears.

Deafness was more widespread then than it is now. First century medicine was not much help. And yet, Mark sends this story to a church in which it is likely that some of the members were deaf. If this is just the story of one lucky person, it is cruel to share this story. There has to be something more than one person’s good fortune. The reason to tell this story is the astounding conclusion, “Jesus makes the deaf to hear.”

One of the church’s first baptismal rituals came from this passage. During baptism, the bishop would spit upon his fingers, then touch the ears and mouth of the person being baptized. The gestures came from Jesus’ actions with this man. The symbolism was that God opens our ears, and we

promise to listen. Jesus prayed, “Be open. Listen.” The early church told the story of this deaf person being healed, because they realized that being a follower of Christ is about listening.

Every once in a while we feel like we heard something. We experience occasional, obscure whisperings of grace, but we do not think of it as anything as extraordinary as God speaking. We forget that this is God’s world and God speaks in a thousand different ways. If we keep our ears open, if we listen with hope, then we might hear something holy.

We should begin by listening to the silence, by turning down the volume. Try a few minutes a day, just long enough to hear the quiet. It may be hard to find complete silence, but we can find something close.

Listen. You notice that the air conditioner sounds like a coffee maker. The clothes dryer is a waltz—one, two, three, one, two three. John Steinbeck described the sound of eggs frying in a pan as “clucking.” Once you’ve heard that, you hear breakfast cooking differently (Julian Treasure, *Ted Talk*). There is a hidden choir around us that is easy to miss.

In quiet moments we hear the muffled sound of the sacred, the silence that becomes prayer. If we are still, we can hear like Elijah, learning that God is

not in the wind or the fire or the earthquake, but in the stillness.

Virginia Mollencott writes: “Prayer is not a matter of my calling (out) in an attempt to get God’s attention, but of my finally listening to the call of God, which has been constant, patient, and insistent. God is speaking to me, and it’s up to me to learn to be polite enough to pay attention.”

Prayer is first of all listening to God. It is openness. It is listening to the silence. Listen in worship. Worship is based on the belief that we hear God in one another. We sing hymns to hear the witness of Christians we have never met. We hear the sacred story of those who came before us. We listen to scripture and hear God say that one day “the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.” That could happen to us.

Listen to the litanies, the prayers, and the sermon, everything you can hear. Listen as though it is holy. Listen as though you are in the presence of God. Listen as though it is about you, as though you heard your name called. Because if I say, “David, pay attention to this.” The Davids in the room will listen more carefully—at least for the rest of this sentence.

Listen to the music in worship. We expect too little from music. Robert Capon writes: “Practically the only place where men now sing when they’re cold sober is in church; and it sounds like it. And

for every man in church who sings, there are five who stand aloof from the whole business as if it were faintly disreputable.”

Listen to this congregation sing, “Fairest Lord Jesus.” Listen to the choir sing about Elijah listening for God. God sings in worship.

Listen to each other. How much would we hear if we really listened?

Have you seen the website [overheardinnewyork.com](http://overheardinnewyork.com)? Here are five examples of conversations that someone paying attention overheard in New York:

“How drunk were you last night?” “I donated money to Wikipedia.”

“We had to fire the nanny. My husband saw her on an escort site.” “Why was he looking up escorts?”

A toddler waving at a pigeon says, “Bye, bye street chicken.”

A guy directing traffic at LaGuardia, “Unlike America, let’s all keep moving forward”

A woman at Starbucks, “The cappuccino is for my husband so put his name on the cup. It’s idiot.”

How much more interesting would our lives be if we really listened, if friends listened, if partners listened, if parents listened, and if children listened? How much richer would our relationships be if we heard each other’s joy and pain, despair and hope, sorrow and love?

A woman says to a stranger, “I’ll give you \$100 to listen to me for an hour. It’s less than I pay my therapist.”

So many people are looking for someone who will listen. The first thing that we owe one another is to listen. The beginning of love is listening. On most of the bad days we do not listen. On most of the good days we do listen. Because when we listen, we hear the sacred. If you believe that God is present in every moment, then whenever we are truly listening, we are listening for God.

Listen to your life. When you wake up, listen to the sounds of the morning. Take advantage of your opportunities to listen: the awakening sound of a shower, taking your child to school, eating lunch with a friend, trying to get your work done, having fun, feeling depressed. Listen through it all. In the sound of birds outside the window, a baby crying or not crying, the trains in the subway, the whispers of the evening, the tick-tock of an old clock, in the thick of it, and out of the thick of it, God speaks.

The question is not whether the things we hear are chance or God’s voice because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance voice through which God cannot say something. There is no event so commonplace but that God does not speak within it. (*Frederick Buechner*) Every day is filled with God’s word of grace.

If we really listened, what would we hear God say? God might tell us that some of the things we treat as life and death are not, and some of what we think of as unimportant is. God might say, “I’ve given you a wonderful life, but you have to listen.”

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*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

