

The Sacred Power of A Listening Heart

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19 & John 1:32-51

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
January 14, 2018 — 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
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1 Samuel 3:1- 10, 19 (NIV)

¹ The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. ² One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." ⁵ And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

⁶ Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸ The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening.".... ¹⁹ The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.

John 1:32-51 (NIV)

³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said,

“You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”
⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶ “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” ⁴⁸ “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” ⁵⁰ Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” ⁵¹ He then added, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

The Sacred Power of A Listening Heart

Over 80 years ago, Jed Harris was a successful producer of plays. One of his successful works was the production of Thornton Wilder’s play, “*Our Town*.” In the middle of a lengthy season mixed with the intense pressure of many details, Harris began to lose his sense of hearing. He could not even hear what other people close to him were saying, and so he was missing crucial details during conversations.

As a result, Jed Harris decided to pay a visit to a renowned audiologist who listened attentively as the producer narrated the sad account of his declining ability to hear. After a thorough examination of Harris’ ears, the hearing specialist drew out from his vest an expensive gold-coated pocket watch and placed it against the producer’s ear.

“Do you hear this watch ticking?” the audiologist asked. “Absolutely,” the producer responded. The audiologist moved farther away and held the watch up to his office door. Harris focused and remarked, “Yea, it is quite audible.” The physician then walked into the next room and asked, “how about now?” “It’s still audible,” Harris replied.

The specialist walked back into the office and returned the watch to his vest. “This phenomenon is quite commonplace,” he said, “especially among successful individuals. Your hearing is excellent Mr. Harris. You’ve simply quit listening.”

Do you know anyone like that? They don’t have a hearing problem, but they most certainly do have a listening problem. Obviously some people do have hearing problems. That happens, of course, especially later on in life, but not nearly as often as people missing messages simply because they do not listen to one another.

Robert Holden, in his book, *Happiness Now!* tells about a husband and wife, both in their late seventies, who decided, after fifty-five years of marriage, to divorce. When their counselor asked them why, the wife issued a catalogue of reasons.

“He never asks if I’m happy,” said the wife. “I assumed you were,” said the husband. “He never says he loves me,” said the wife. “I thought you knew I loved you,” said the husband.

The wife continued, “He never says I’m beautiful.” The husband replied, “I look at you every day and admire your beauty.” “We rarely talk,” said the wife. “I know you like to read a lot,” said the husband. “I read because we don’t talk,” said the wife.

There was a pause. “And we never go out,” said the wife. “I thought you liked to stay in,” said the husband. “I only stay in because I’m waiting to go out,” said the wife.

The counselor continued to take notes. “He’s also very mean to me,” said the wife. “In what way?” asked the counselor. “Well, at breakfast, three times a week for fifty-five years, he always serves me the crust of the loaf, and I hate the bread-crust!”

The husband was distraught, “I give you the crust, my dear, because that is my favorite part of the loaf.” “What we have here,” says the familiar movie line, “is a failure to communicate.”

Communication is so vital to successful living. Women seem to be more conscious of that than men. One national magazine polled over 30,000 women and only one problem ranked above conflicts over money, “poor communication.” Researcher Terri Schultz writes, “Although many women chose their partners based on sex appeal, research shows that if they had to do it again, they said the ability to communicate is much more important.”

There is a beautiful story in the Bible about someone who spent a lifetime listening. In his case, though, he was listening to God. Most of you remember the story of the boy Samuel from your Sunday school days.

It begins with the very touching scene of a holy woman named Hannah pleading with God to allow her to have a son because she is barren. Hannah made a vow to God that if He would allow her to have a son, she would give the boy to the service of God all the days of his life.

Some time passed and God answered Hannah’s prayer. She conceived and bore a son, calling his name Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked for him from the Lord.”

Hannah followed through on her promise to give Samuel to God. As soon as he was weaned, Samuel was placed under the care and training of an old priest named Eli. Eli was gradually losing his vision. But he was faithful in his teaching of young Samuel. He also gave Samuel light duties around the tabernacle.

One night when Samuel was about 11 years old, he had a life-changing experience. He was lying down there in the house of the Lord, trying to go to sleep, when he heard a voice in the night. He ran to

Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Again the voice called, "Samuel!" And, once again, Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now the record indicates, Samuel had been studying about God, but he did not yet know God: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

That's interesting, don't you think? Could there be many people, including many adults in church, who have studied about God, but do not know God? I wonder. Maybe it's because we have not been listening for God's voice.

A third time this voice in the night called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then, says the Scripture, Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if He calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

It's a beautiful story about the call of one of Israel's great prophets. God spoke; Samuel listened. The 19th verse of this chapter says, "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground." In other words, Samuel, who listened to God, had a lifelong relationship with God and a fruitful ministry.

Today we want to spend just a few moments dealing with the sacred power of a listening heart. Wonderful things happen sometimes when we're willing to listen.

THE FIRST THING WE NEED TO NOTE IS THAT LISTENING IS NOT THE SAME AS HEARING.

Hearing refers to the sounds that enter our ears. It is a physical process that, provided we do not have any hearing problems, happens automatically. Listening, however, requires more than that: it requires focus and concentrated effort.

An 80-year-old grandfather went to his daughter's house for Sunday dinner. When the meal was over, he announced that he was going to take a walk through the neighborhood. "I'll be back in twenty minutes," he said. But two hours had passed before he finally returned. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "But I stopped to talk to an old friend and he just wouldn't stop listening."

I like that. Some people will not stop talking. But blessed is the person who will not stop listening. That's a wonderful gift to give to someone, to listen to them that intently. The greatest honor you can pay someone is to really listen to them. As David Augsburger once said, "An open ear is the only believable sign of an open heart."

Listening is not the same as hearing. Listening requires intent. It requires focus. One common problem is that instead of listening closely to what someone is saying, we often get distracted after a sentence or two, and instead start to think about what we are going to say in reply. This means that we do not listen to the rest of what the other person is saying.

You can see how treacherous this can be. Listening is so important that many top employers provide listening skills training for their employees. This is not surprising when you consider that good listening skills can lead to better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, and increased sharing of information. That in turn can lead to a more creative and innovative workplace. But I think we can all agree: hearing is not the same thing as listening.

LISTENING TO SOMEONE IS A WAY OF SAYING YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO ME.

You matter. Author and radio teacher Chuck Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. In his book *Stress Fractures* he tells about getting nervous and tense about it. "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration," Swindoll answered, "Honey, you can tell me — and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly." "I'll never forget her answer," he says. She said, "Then listen slowly!"

What she wanted to know was if her Daddy cared enough about her to really listen to her. That is what many people hunger for. When we listen to them — really listen — we are saying you matter to me. You're important to me.

OF COURSE, THE MOST IMPORTANT LISTENING WE CAN DO IS TO LISTEN TO GOD.

It is interesting how much time Jesus spent in prayer. Obviously Jesus believed listening to the voice of God was important. It's God's deepest wish — to direct His children toward positive, fulfilling lives. But most of us never listen. And so we miss out on some of life's greatest joys.

Nancy Ortberg tells of going out to dinner with a man named Doug Cole in Washington D. C. years ago. Doug told her about a 30-year-old insurance executive he met at a party. Doug learned that this young man, Bob, was a new Christian. Intrigued, he asked how things were going. "Have you found a church?" He asked. "Yes", Bob said. "Have you found a Bible Study?" "Yes, I have one of those too." Finally Doug asked, "How about your relationship with God in prayer?"

Bob didn't have much going on there, and said that he didn't know much about that. So Doug laid out a challenge for him: to pick something to pray over every day for the next six months. The prayers could be elaborate or simple, structured or free form, listening to or speaking to God, whatever. But Bob must pray at least briefly every day. "If at the end of six months God has not done something truly significant," Doug told him, "I will then pay you \$500."

"Hmm," Nancy told Doug, "That doesn't sound very biblical." "No, but I do it all of the time," Doug answered her.

Bob accepted the challenge, but didn't know what to pray for. Bob and his wife lived in DC. What with the city's international flavor, they chose a different land to pray for every day. So along those lines, Bob decided to pray daily for Kenya.

Not much happened for four or five months. The prayer experiment was yielding little. Then one night he sat next to a woman at a dinner party. She was from Kenya. She ran an orphanage.

Bob related that he felt as though ice water was suddenly running through his veins. He had been fantasizing about how to spend the \$500 Doug had promised him, but suddenly he had a strong image of a wad of \$500 dollar bills sprouting wings and flying away. He asked for details about the orphanage and listened to her answers for a full intense hour. She told Bob that no one had ever shown such interest. Would he consider flying to Kenya to see it first hand?

To make a long story short, Bob ended up providing for the care of those Kenyan children and seeing to the supplying of that orphanage. He made such a splash that the President of Kenya invited him to his palace. There Bob advocated for prisoners of conscience in that country. Later those prisoners were released.

The US Secretary of State called Bob and asked him how he did it. The United States government had been unsuccessfully seeking their freedom for some time. It was no mystery to Bob how it came about. God had guided him to pray for Kenya and wonderful things were happening.

If you and I were truly listening to God, we would see wonderful things happen in our lives too.

Hearing isn't the same thing as listening. When we listen to someone we are saying you are really important to me. You matter. The most important listening we can do is to listen to God. God's deepest wish is to direct us to a positive and fulfilling life. If that's not happening in our lives, it is because we are not listening to Him.

Remember what St. Paul said, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).” Notice he didn’t say that faith comes from talking or doing. Faith comes from hearing and that only happens when we listen.

The old prophet Eli told young Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if He calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

What an eloquent, yet powerful prayer. Are you listening to the people around you — especially those closest to you? More importantly, are you listening to God? A positive, fulfilling life awaits you. Just listen.

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