

Are you a good listener? To be more accurate, are you a good *hearer*? Many of us may listen just fine, but at times we don't really hear. Ezekiel was apparently running into such a situation in the reading today. God says to him, "I send you to the people of Israel. The people are rebellious and impudent and stubborn. I send you to them and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God,' and you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear." God is warning Ezekiel that the people of Israel will not accept the words he will speak on God's behalf; they will not want to hear what he has to say. The truth is that we human beings can be pretty good at hearing without really listening.

In the Gospel, Mark tells us the well-known story of Jesus in the synagogue teaching people he knows quite well. They say, "Where did this man get all of this? What mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Jesus responds, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, and among his own kin and in his own house." Mark says that Jesus could do no mighty works there, and he marveled at their unbelief and moved on."

In both instances, when Ezekiel and Jesus spoke, we see described a people who did not want to hear what God was saying to them. What was being said and the way it was being said was different, and was calling for change, and so, like children, they put their hands over their ears and said, "Can't hear you!" Have you ever reacted that way to a different idea or thought or suggestion? I know I have. Why do we do that? Well, the truth is that we human beings have trouble welcoming new ideas that are too different, and that call for some kind of change in the way we live our lives. We resist them. We even sometimes resent them, and if they are too different, we openly fight them. We can even get pretty vicious when we believe that our beliefs and ideas are being challenged or threatened. Think of one of those times when we are listening to someone speak. At first they are saying things we agree with and are comfortable with. But then they say something that is totally outside of our frame of reference, something we strongly disagree with, something that would require some kind of change in our lives. Remember how our stomachs get tight and suddenly we don't want to hear anything else? Why? What is it within us that causes such a response?

Isn't it because we are threatened by anything that calls us to change anything too significant? I think at least part of our problem is our need to hold up everything and everyone we encounter up against what we presently think or believe. If it is too different from the way I see things, then either that idea or my understanding has to be wrong.

There's that old saying that two things you should never bring up are politics and religion. Like most old sayings, they become old because they contain a lot of truth. It would be easy to field test. Walk into a group of people these days and say that Joe Biden or Donald Trump is one of our greatest presidents ever. After the reaction calms down, say that Joe Biden or Donald Trump is our worst president ever. There will be other energetic reactions as the people hear very different messages. My point is this: the truth of such statements is always subjective. We can even look at all of the same empirical data and reach different conclusions. Each of us reacts in direct proportion to how threatened or challenged we might feel. The problem arises when I believe it is not OK for me to see things differently than the other. It is not OK for us to differ if I feel pressure to change my own idea or belief. If I am right, and I am pretty sure that I am, then it is my duty to get you to agree with me or at least to ignore what you have to say. Sounds a bit ridiculous, but we do it all of the time, and of course this also is present in many religious arguments. It is what happened to Ezekiel and to Jesus.

We carry this dynamic into our marriages, our friendships, almost all of our relationships. Different from me is a problem because I am right, and even if I have a little doubt, I am quite comfortable with my position. I am used to it, and I do not appreciate having it challenged just like the people Ezekiel and Jesus were dealing with. Whenever I consider two people trying to discuss any subject in which they are

emotionally involved, I remember an image described by a seminary professor. He was referring to theological arguments when people may be listening to one another but their defenses prevent them from really hearing the other. He said it's like two vacuum cleaners hooked up nozzle to nozzle, both operating on full exhaust. Not much happens except for a lot of hot air and energy being expended, and neither side making any headway. In a word, we human beings do not usually welcome differences because we resist change, and yet we worship and pledge our loyalty to the greatest Change Agent in history. Human nature really hasn't changed much from the rebellious people Ezekiel tried to talk to. At times we can be like Jesus' own people who refused to hear what he had to say since it was different from what they expected, and his message was a problem for them. What do you suppose was the real reason Jesus was crucified? It is simply that he was too different and called for changes, and people were threatened by his message. He spoke of a God whose will it is that we love one another, regardless of our differences, and the people covered their ears and cried, "Can't hear you!" He said that all people, black, white, Jew, Muslim, gay, uneducated, agnostic, rich, poor, traditional, charismatic, all people, are loved by God and it is not our job to judge anyone, and the people cover their ears and cry, "Can't hear you!" He was also quite annoying when he said that what is in our hearts is more important than what we say, and that we should generously share all that we have with those less fortunate, and the people covered their ears and cried, "Can't hear you!" Jesus spoke of a God who wants us to devote our entire lives to his service, and to put other people first and ourselves last, and the people cried, "Enough is enough, and they killed him."

My friends, what would we do if Jesus walked into this sanctuary right now? He would certainly look and sound very different from the rest of us. I guarantee that he would say things to us that we might not want to hear. Would we listen attentively and take what he said to heart? Or is it possible that we might cover our ears and cry, "Can't hear you?" I've always believed that if I truly listen to what Jesus says in the assigned Gospel reading on any given Sunday I will be bothered or upset as I realize what he is saying to me about how I am living my life. I may not pay much attention, or even try to find a way that his message does not include me. The challenge for us, like the people in the synagogue that day, is that Jesus has become pretty familiar to us which can seriously limit the shock value of what he has to say to us.

Remember how he said that when we are serving "the least of these we are serving him?" The truth is that we do hear Jesus every day of our lives in the faces and voices of those around us. Is it possible that we have become so used to the pain and suffering in the world, sometimes right next to us, that we do not hear Jesus calling on us to try to do what he would do? There is that old saying that "familiarity breeds contempt," and maybe we could add that "familiarity breeds a kind of deafness?"

The challenge for us when we really want to hear what is being said is for us to forget ourselves for that moment, to put aside our own beliefs and opinions, and to not to compare the message with our present understanding or values. That gets tougher the more we begin to see how that message could affect the way we live our lives. The Good News is that what Jesus has to say will always draw us closer to being the people we were created to be. The bad news is that we are surrounded by a culture that encourages us to put our hands over our ears and say "Can't hear you" and to take care of ourselves first. We must remind each other that the reason the Gospel is called "Good News" is because that is what it is. Now, if we can only hear it..... Amen
