

Listening Saves!
Sermon on Psalm 116
Sunday April 6, 2008
Trinity United, Ottawa
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“I love God, because God inclined an ear to me...” (gesture)

Saved from the snares of death...by a good listener! The psalmist was eternally grateful that God heard him out. Whatever God might have *done* for this writer in ancient times, we don't learn, do we? What remains is a poetic attribute to a *listening* God.

Listening, apparently one of the simplest human acts, is a saving one. Listening to someone - not advising or reacting or helping, but just inclining your ear attentively - can be profoundly healing, for both parties. Anyone who has ever volunteered on a 'help line' knows this to be true.

“Listening is extraordinarily powerful” international Leadership expert Margaret Wheatley reflects, in this inspiring book “Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future.” She illustrates with the testimony of a young South African man at the Truth & Reconciliation Commission hearings. This black youth told the Commission about how he was blinded by a policeman, who shot him in the face at close range. Then he said. ‘I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. Now, it feels like I've got my sight back, by coming here and telling you...’

Good listening heals, because it builds relationships. Between black and white South Africans, just as between husbands and wives here. Between Palestinians and Israelis, just as between parents and children - at every age and stage of family life. Wheatley quotes a clever T-shirt slogan “You can't hate someone whose story you know.” Presumably, that even includes your mother!

All humans need to be heard. By our ever-listening God, yes. But more concretely,

by all of us who can be God's ears amidst the cacophony of everyday life. Every human has a story, perhaps not so dramatic, but a story of wounding or distress or illness that they need to tell, in order to heal. Something they need to release today through sharing, in order to move better tomorrow. Otherwise, Wheatley suggests, we keep telling our stories to ourselves - and we go mad!

There is not much space for listening in our time. Well, 'easy listening' maybe - but real listening isn't easy! Asking someone to 'just listen!' is almost as challenging as asking them to "just be!" It runs so counter to our culture...our culture of control.

Listening is often the best answer, and sometimes the only answer, to what is beyond our control, like past mistakes, and peace in the world. Wheatley tells of a circle of international women, hearing from one of them the horror of finding her grandparents slaughtered in their village. "Many of the women were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix, to make it better. Anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up as if to push back their desire to help. She said: 'I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me.'"

That takes real love. Real attention. Real skill. Real spiritual discipline. When we hear pain, we often feel our own again. What is not healed in us, reacts. Wants to act. To do anything but hurt. Compassion means 'feeling with.' Its hardest when we feel our own pain as well!

And it doesn't take an atrocity to challenge our capacity to listen. A whining child will do it! Our families and our church and our workplaces offer us lots of provocations to heal ourselves, so we can really listen.

I suspect I challenge Bob lots of evenings, with my need to talk. My ritual, firmly rooted in my at-home mom times, when all my efforts seemed transitory or invisible, is to greet him with a babbling narrative of my day. And my daily story

can take sudden swerves from domestic trivia - “I picked up the soymilk, cause there wasn’t enough for our morning smoothie...” - to the tearfully profound: “Dear old Bill died today.”

Thankfully, Bob is a masterful listener. He knows when to just nod and uh-hunh past my blather, and when to focus right in with my feelings, if I’m hurting or hurrying!

When have you experienced good listening? At Trinity @9, Susan described being listened to by her dad as a child: “When I said ‘Dad?’ he’d say, ‘Just a moment.’ Then he’d put what he was doing down. And come over to me. And sit down with me and look at me and say ‘O.K.?’ - How special that is, to feel his full attention!” She used the present tense. Her listening father is evidently still with her. And she is very intentional about listening to her son Spencer. “I try not to hear his complaint, but to hear that something’s not right in his world. Not to just listen to the words, but to listen for the emotions behind them. To let those feelings be released. If I’m not too tired...I try to listen with patience and understanding.”

The listener we all seek. The listener we all want to be. God’s ears on an attentive human face. Listening with an open heart and no judgement at all. Can we all learn to listen a little more, a little more deeply, somewhere in our lives? In our busy families? With that difficult person at work? In every meeting here at church? What transformational healing might happen? What will be saved?

And there’s a big listening challenge coming for all Canadians over the next two years. Our own Truth & Reconciliation Commission with our Native peoples, “Remember the Children” its called. Our opportunity to hear the stories of those still suffering the legacy of the residential schools. Our own Canadian Apartheid is aching to be heard and healed. Will we listen to their stories? Will we listen, even when it hurts to hear and listening isn’t easy? I pray so!

I think great listeners are often much more heroic than action figures. So let’s honour those who have listened to us. And stretch ourselves to really listen for each

other, even in everyday conversations. In Zimbabwe, its customary to greet people this way:

“Makidi”

How are you?

“Ndiripo Makadiwo”

I am here if you are here.

“Ndiripo”

I am here.

In listening, we can be truly here for each other. God’s saving ears. Alleluia!