

¹Samuel 3:1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the 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. ⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." ¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

Communication is hard work, and susceptible of many mistakes. Just listen to the following eight words repeated seven times, to see what I mean:

1. I did not say Bill stole your car.
2. I **did not** say Bill stole your car.
3. I did not **say** Bill stole your car.
4. I did not say **Bill** stole your car.
5. I did not say Bill **stole** your car.
6. I did not say Bill stole **your** car.
7. I did not say Bill stole your **car**.

The "sil-LAB-ul" upon which you put the "em-FAS-is" makes a difference, indeed.

And that's when people are really listening. Can you image what happens when people don't really listen?

Do you listen to God? Do people you know listen to God? ... Or, is that something that we don't talk too much about anymore?

Part of the problem that we have in listening to God is that we simply don't put that much effort into it. And part of the reason we aren't practiced at listening to God is that we don't put much effort into listening to one another.

And part of that problem is that we simply are not comfortable with SILENCE so much at all. Let me allow for there to be 2-1/2 minutes of absolute silence during worship and see what happens!

Soren Kierkegaard once said that if he were a medical doctor and he was to write just one prescription for the healing of all the world's ills, he would write the prescription for **SILENCE**. [[answer to sermon fill-in-the-blank sermon point in bulletin.](#)]

Psalms 46:10 says: Be **STILL** and know that I am God. [[answer to another sermon fill-in-the-blank sermon point in bulletin.](#)]

Isaiah 30:15 says: "In **QUIETNESS** and trust shall be your strength." [[answer to another sermon fill-in-the-blank sermon point in bulletin.](#)]

Silence makes such a difference – in how we listen to one another, and in how we listen to God. *Very few people, if any, can do either well without doing the other.*

Silence actually changes any event we are experiencing. It alters our perceptions and our ability to “see” what is actually happening.

Silence is the first part – the first requirement for listening.

Secondly, I want us to think about LISTENING in terms of **something other than MERE INFORMATION GATHERING.**

Two types of conversation usually are the meals of our communication life:

- (1) **DISCUSSION** – where we use our minds to BREAK DOWN what is being said in order to seek INFORMATION, or ANSWERS, or AGREEMENT. (Memory key: same root word in disCUSSION as in concussion & percussion.)
- (2) **DIALOGUE** – where we listen more with our heart than with our head, where relationships are more important than information; where the goal is more open-ended than mere agreement/disagreement.

When Samuel entered into conversation with God, which is a more accurate description of what he did:

(1) information, consensus seeking, **DISCUSSION**

Or

(2) relational, heart listening, open ended **DIALOGUE**

In life, both forms of listening are important. The problem is when we use one kind when the other is called for.

One of the examples that came to my mind, when dancing with these notions was when we get a wrong number telephone call. When someone calls you, but they think they have someone else, how do you respond?

Or, when you call someone else, and its not who you think it is, how do you feel?

Sometimes, it's handled as mere exchange of information. Other times – and this is mostly when we allow it to happen – it turns into an encounter.

When I'm not so concerned about getting rid of this interruption as quickly as possible, but curious about the serendipity nature of it all – I can receive some interesting gifts in life.

The phone number at the parsonage is 925-0880. The phone number for a local motel, which specializes (apparently) in weekly or monthly tenants, is 926-0880. We go through times of lots of wrong phone numbers. One time a social worker called, looking for a room for a client, who was apparently coming out of a half-way house, or some transitional life placement.

Do you have any rooms to rent by the month?

No.

How about by the week?

No.

But I have a client who needs a place to stay for two months. I thought that at your place I didn't have to pay by the night.

Well. We don't have any rooms by the night, either. You see, you've got a Methodist parsonage, and my wife doesn't like when I bring people in to sleep with us.

Oh, my goodness. I had no idea. I am so sorry.

Don't be. That motel you want is 926-0880. And now you'll have someone praying for your client. So, there's no reason to be sorry. Have a good day.

Not much information was exchanged. It was not an encounter that either one of us expected or sought. But I like to think that a good life experience, and even a reason for a smile, was given to both of us as a surprise gift.

When we learn how to listen for God's interruptions, we also learn how to listen to people in our lives, so as to encounter God and do a better job at being a human.

People are hungering for someone to listen – to really hear them. It's inexplicably linked to how we listen for God.

THE ABILITY TO LISTEN RESTS ON HOW SUCCESSFULLY WE RESIST THE IMPULSE TO REACT EMOTIONALLY TO THE POSITION OF THE OTHER. [answer to sermon fill-in-the-blank sermon point in bulletin, so repeat.]

That means that we **LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY ARE COMMUNICATING**, not just to agree/disagree or believe/disbelieve with what they are saying.

It's an interesting experiment you could try this week. Keep track of the times you listen to people, and ask: In that conversation was I listening to understand what the person was communicating or was I just trying to figure out if I agreed/disagree or believed/disbelieved them.

Do you see the difference? You might be surprised if you keep track of how often you do one and not the other.

After you gather this information, see if you can change your listening habit.

We do this so much with people, that we also do it with God.

So often we miss what God's saying, because (a) we are listening for information instead of relationship, and (b) if we think that God's not living up to our expectations, we tend to write it off as not being of God, instead of trying to better understand.

Here's another part of our problem. It might indeed have been the same problem that Samuel had at first.

"Why is God talking to me?"

Well, I've sung the hymn. *We go to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses. And He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever know.*

It's just all about God and me, me and God.

Folks, if all God wanted in creation was companionship, the work of creation would have come to a screeching halt after **dogs came into the world**. [\[answer to another sermon fill-in-the-blank sermon point in bulletin.\]](#)

They are a far better companion than we humans are.

After Samuel finally understood that God was seeking a relationship, not mere information exchange, he also came to understand in what shortly followed in our First Testament Lesson: **HEARING THE WORD OF GOD IS NEVER FOR PERSONAL CONSUMPTION ALONE**. [\[answer to another sermon fill-in-the-blank sermon point in bulletin.\]](#)

Just like God told Abraham (Genesis 12:1-2) that God blesses us in order for us to be a blessing; so, too, God communicates with us, so that our words may not fall to the ground.

This past week, I had a young mother send me a text message that her young daughter said – at bath time, holding up water in her hands – “are we remembering our baptism?”

My sisters and brothers, whether we know it or not, not many of our words fall to the ground, even when we don't pay attention. The children are watching and listening.

People who have the wrong ideas about God (ideas that scare them) or about church (ideas that don't make them feel welcome) are looking and listening to see what our words are.

Are they hearing words that are passed on from God, or are they hearing words that originate in people who are trying to pretend that they are Christians, and making it up as they go along, assuming that they are speaking for God.

Samuel spent his whole life up to that point, living in the church, sleeping at night in front of the ark of the covenant, and he didn't know the word of God.

[Sleeping in a garage doesn't make you an automobile any more than attending church makes you a Christian.](#)

We've got to listen. Spend time in silence, and really listen for God's Voice. Not to agree nor disagree, but to enter into that special relationship that ONLY occurs when we listen, in silence.

I had a friend contact me this week about a big change he was making in his life. He emailed me and explained several reasons for the change. They all seemed legitimate, but I called him up. **I didn't want to read his information; I wanted to hear his voice.**

As he explained his life change to me, he began to tell the story. He had spent a week of mostly silence, in which he said that for the first time in a very long time, he was able to actually listen to God, instead of just doing what he thought God wanted him to do. And he was surprised to find out that **things that he thought he SHOULD be doing, things that he felt OBLIGATED TO DO, were none of what God was calling him to do. He was changing his life direction, and he said he felt better at peace than he had felt in a long time. I HEARD THAT PEACE IN HIS VOICE.**

My sisters and brothers, last week, we prayed together the covenant prayer, of the Wesley tradition. We can't keep that commitment, if we don't listen to God.

- **We can't listen to God, if we don't spend time in silence.**
- We can't listen to God in silence, **unless we are willing to receive more than information. We have to be open to God speaking to our heart.**
- We won't really hear God, and **keep it just to ourselves. God wants us to become something very, very special. And to do something very, very special.**
- **It's not all about us. But we will never be content, nor know peace, until we are willing to listen to God's call.**

Wrong telephone numbers can be received as an annoying interruption in life. Or, we can be open to the happening of some pretty neat stuff, if we receive each one as an opportunity to receive a gift that we don't know yet what it is.

Be still. Listen. Receive. Live. Give.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.