

Have You Ever Heard

Read: Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7

One of the multiple choice questions on the pre-marriage awareness inventory that I've been using with couples in pre-marital counseling sessions asks each partner to answer the following: a. my partner is a better listener than a talker; b. my partner is a better talker than a listener. Pick one. Listening and talking, talking and listening; both are important.

Someone who refuses to talk about things that matter, a person who refuses to open up and communicate, is often afraid of intimacy. It makes them feel too vulnerable in any one of a number of ways. Men like to imagine themselves as being "the strong, silent type," meaning I can handle everything without my woman meddling in my affairs. I'm not sure what to say about women with a similar strategy of not speaking. I don't recall ever meeting a woman who was at a loss for words. Women, hold those stones; I'm just kidding.

Speaking openly with another human being about matters of the heart is a barometer of trust. When our hearts are healed and when we are secure in who we are, we are confident enough to let another human being begin to really know us. This is true between husbands and wives, between good and loyal friends, and between brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. Speaking the truth in love is an avenue that leads to respect and trust in one another.

Turning to those who are better listeners than talkers, there is the pithy wisdom that says God gave us two ears and only one mouth to teach us that we ought to spend twice as much time listening as we do talking. If you've ever been in the place where what you really needed was not someone to lecture you, to fix you, or to problem solve for you, but someone who would simply, truly, deeply listen to you pour out your heart without giving you cheap advice, you know that good listeners are a precious and all too rare commodity. Good listeners are hard to find.

I know something about the skills involved in being a good listener. It is a complex art with component parts that can be learned and developed. I've

taught courses on active listening. Knowing what I do, I still catch myself being a poor listener more often than I would like to admit.

Good listening requires discipline. It demands the energy it takes to be present and attentive. A good listener doesn't let his or her mind wander. A good listener will invest enough in the speaker to be truly empathetic. It requires the gift of time. A good listener doesn't try to speed things up, jumping to conclusions, filling in words and ending sentences for the one speaking, then providing what are thought to be helpful solutions. "You have a problem? Here let me fix it for you, then we can move on to something I want to talk about." A good listener doesn't change the focus and doesn't change the subject, as in, "Oh, your problem reminds me of one of my problems; let me tell you about it." A good listener will give you enough time, space, and respect for you to sort your issues out without judging you or tinkering with your psyche. A good listener uses the eyes as well as the ears, learning to see things in a human face like sadness, or fear, or discouragement, or anger. A good listener uses the eyes to notice body language of all kinds that speak silently of the speaker's internal state. All these skills and more are part of what is known as active listening.

Prior to listening there comes the experience of simply hearing. This is where apostles and prophets and preachers and teachers come in. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. But how are people to hear if there is no one to proclaim it? At first bloom, Christian faith begins with receptivity. There is a passive quality to it, a surrendering involved. There comes what we might call a "Mary moment" when we say as she did, "Let it be done to me according to your word." This is a first step, but it leads to more.

When Paul first came to Ephesus he found about a dozen people who identified themselves as disciples. They had heard about John the Baptist's ministry calling people to repent and believe in Jesus. Simply put, repent means to change direction: go a different way, live a different way, with new priorities. So they did what they could, making the turn away from their sins. Evidently, Paul sensed there was still something lacking.

You know as well as I do that Christian faith is far more than just giving things up for God, like some people give up chocolate for Lent. Sadly, many people even today see Christianity as a “don’t do this, don’t do that” religion, as a system of rules and regulations designed to make you feel guilty enough to conform to someone else’s standards of behavior. This is of course far from the truth.

Somehow Paul discerned that these disciples in Ephesus had only heard the first part of John’s message. It’s as though they had become disciples of John the Baptist but had somehow missed the point of his preaching. John preached the turning from sin in order to turn toward Jesus who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. John’s ministry was preparatory.

For a reason we are not told, Paul asked them very directly, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Then Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”

You’ve no doubt heard the saying, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.” Today I would add, “Let’s not throw the bath water out just yet either.” John’s ministry of preparing the way for Jesus’ ministry was bath water ministry. It brought people who were willing to come to the point of being able to hear. There are many things in this world that make us hard of hearing. Sin in all of its forms stops our ears, and they are only unclogged by the preaching of repentance. With repentance the human heart is opened to the work of God.

The preaching of repentance is half the Gospel. Perhaps that’s why Jesus said of John that no one born of woman was any greater than John, but John is the least in the Kingdom of Heaven among those who believe. Isn’t Jesus saying, “There is so much more involved in the Spirit-filled life than giving things up? Repentance is just the entry level of discipleship. It prepares the way for something deeper to come. You’ll never really love Jesus in fullness as long as you love your sins. Repentance is a mandatory exchange of something that won’t last

to receive something that will last, for time and for eternity. John brought people to see this and called them to choose.

The life of a disciple, the life in the Holy Spirit, is full of choices. First God chooses us, and then we are invited to choose God over against our old ways of living where we refuse to acknowledge God. Then it's as though God chooses us again, making us free to choose receptivity over the obstinacy of our self-centered life style, freeing us to receive the Holy Spirit.

I think we can rightly say that God delights to give us the Holy Spirit to live in and through us. The indwelling Holy Spirit is one of the means whereby the risen Christ remains present in the world. Christ is present through us! How much dignity, how much glory can you stand? We become ambassadors of Christ, preaching and proclaiming the new life that has become available to all who will hear and receive God's gifts. And we develop gifts for this that are perfectly suited to our own unique individuality cultivated in the presence of God.

The text continues with the phrase, "On hearing this..." Paul had told them about something they hadn't yet heard, but the way into their hearts had been prepared. The obstacles had been removed and the crooked paths into the depth of their hearts had been made straight. They were ready and receptive. "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied..."

Notice that the hearing and receiving resulted in further speaking, evidently with both ecstatic and intelligible speech, in the tongues of men and of angels as Paul described it in I Corinthians 13. The New Testament includes two types of speaking in tongues. One type was someone speaking in a language, unlearned by the speaker, but recognizable to some hearers. This type was recorded by Luke in his account of the first Christian Pentecost in Acts 2. The Galilean speakers were proclaiming the mighty acts of God in many different languages "as the Spirit gave them utterance. In other places, speaking in tongues was ecstatic utterance that needed to be accompanied by another gift of the Spirit, that of interpretation and presumably also praising God. Prophecy would also announce

God's glory among those in worship in such a way that the Body of Christ would be built up and strengthened.

Evidently their receptivity to what they heard opened the door in Ephesus for the Gospel ministry of Paul, for we read in verses 8-10 the following: "He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord."

As is still true today, the speaking, hearing, and receiving of the Holy Spirit very soon results in opposition from those who are not receptive to the Spirit of God. We should not forget that the freedom to choose is not always exercised in favor of the Kingdom of God. Not every person welcomes his rule and reign through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the coming weeks I want to speak to you about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. I not only want to insure that no one here will ever need to say, "I never even heard there is a Holy Spirit." But more than hearing the words, I want all of us to come to a deeper appreciation of the Spirit's presence among us, to become more deeply acquainted with the Spirit's way with us so that we will be better equipped to follow wherever the Spirit of Jesus Christ may lead us.