

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Called to Listen"
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The critical ability any person has to have to enjoy choral or any music is listening. Without the ability to physically hear, we might enjoy the smiles or the choreography of a choir, but that's about it.

Once we determine that we are physically able to hear the sounds around us, the next level is being able to hear pitch, unison rhythm, simultaneous pauses or rests, volume dynamics and diction or enunciation. All these attributes make for a fine, "what a pleasure to hear" choir. Choir directors work hard at making the individuals of their group more able to listen to one another, to correct where possible, and to follow their direction. These are not easily achieved goals. It takes time, commitment, passion and probably a love of what you are doing as well. So if I have to sum it up in a sound byte, I would say, "Choristers are called to listen."

Now everyone here may not consider him or herself a choral music scholar, chorister, choir member, or a even person who greatly enjoys listening to choral music. Nevertheless, we are all called to listen. We are called to listen to one another. That is one of the definitions of respect in any relationship. You cannot respect another person if you cannot listen to them.

In counseling, you cannot understand or help another person without first building some basic listening skills. These skills do not come automatically with good physical hearing, as most of you know, as you take a moment to reflect on how you have felt when you know someone has not been listening to you, not giving you their full attention.

Listening is one of the keys to a healthy relationship. It is not optional. Even those who have no physical hearing develop other languages, such as sign language, to be able to hear one another and understand one another at a deeper level. Without listening to one another, we will not understand each other. Without listening, we will not get to know each other. Then we could talk about understanding second and third languages. But we can't even get to that point, until we try to listen.

Of course what I am doing now is pretty much pointless without listening. I know our minds wander, but remember the main reason we come into a church building is not just to hear the guy at the front, or the wonderful music, or simply grab a few moments of silence. No! It is to listen to what God our Creator has to say to us.

David the Psalmist says that what God has to say to us in the Scriptures is like a torch or flashlight on a very dark camping trip. You cannot see your way in the dark, even on a very good path, except with appropriate light. Jesus said that God is constantly speaking to us if we would just train our ears to listen.

Instead of the camping trip image, he uses the image of the farmer or backyard gardener. Each one is sowing seed into the farm or garden space. Today many would use machinery on a larger farm. But in the ancient world, one would wear a sling or have a bag, and take handfuls of seed and throw them, spread them onto the ground. Most grains would grow with a proper amount of sun and water.

But just like today, the ancient gardener would have to take notice of the kind of soil. Here we know that what is good for evergreen bushes and trees probably will not be all that good for flowers or vegetables. So we need to sweeten the soil appropriate to what is growing.

Often a poor farmer would just be stuck with whatever soil he happened to have. He didn't have enough money for fancy fertilizers, and wouldn't even be able to barter for the neighbor's animal dung. He would simply sow his seed and hope for the best. In many parts of the world, I am sure this is still true.

In Matthew 13, Jesus uses this image as a way to talk about our listening to God, and our receptivity to what God has to say to each one of us. This is because we are all called to listen to God, but we may not know what is hindering us from doing so. Jesus suggests three reasons why people either don't listen, or do listen but then give up on what they hear.

The first is that the soil in the garden is hard. The seed never goes in. This can be because of a number of reasons. They don't think it is true, or relevant or helpful, or they simply aren't open to something new. It can also be because they have been hurt before and do not want to open themselves

anew. Whatever the reason, it's like seed on the path or on cement, it does not take germinate and therefore is bird seed. If you are hardening your heart to God, it would be wise to take the rest of the time that I am speaking and ask yourself, what can I do to understand my hardness. Ask God, "Please open me up to what you have to say, O God." This personal reflection would be more important to you than the rest of what I am going to say.

The second reason Jesus gives for people listening but not following through with what they hear is the image of the rocky soil. We know about rocky soil here in Newfoundland. This is the only place I have ever lived where the neighbor chooses to put his fence line in with a jack hammer, because there is so much rock. The rocky soil in Jesus' Middle Eastern setting is enough soil to allow germination of the seed, but not enough soil to allow a good root system. So what you have is a small plant growing and then wilting and dying because it cannot establish itself. Jesus uses this image for those who listen to the Scriptures, who listen to God at one part in their life, but then later on when their faith is challenged, and it costs them more to believe than they wish to spend, so they give up on the faith. If you are a person who contemplating giving up on Christianity, which is a popular thing to do in North America, I urge you to reconsider. Let God bring more soil into your life, more teaching, more understanding of the difficulties and challenges you are going through from a Christian point of view and then acknowledge your unbelief, and cry out to God to help you be re-established in that which gives you life and reason for living.

The third reason Jesus gives for people listening but not following through with what they hear is the image of the thorny soil. Most gardeners know that it is not wise to sow seed in ground that already has well established weeds. I currently am dealing with gout weed, which is choking great sections of my perennial garden. No farmer in the ancient world would knowingly sow their seed amongst thorny weeds. But this motion of sowing seed here and there was quite random, just as our travels here and there often seem to be. Jesus says the ground received the seed. The seed germinated. The root system developed. But other root systems were stronger and choked the life out of the good grain. Jesus is quite blunt when he says that anxieties and materialistic preferences kill the spiritual life of the good grain. This is a warning to all of us in our anxiety-ridden, materialistic cultures to remember to talk to God often, choose God's ways, and yield our rebellious spirits to the Spirit of God who brings love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

gentleness, faithfulness, goodness and self-control; against which there are no laws. He reminds us to put listening to God first. Any of us who would put our priorities elsewhere are challenged to put our priority on that one relationship that makes a difference. If we are called in this life to listen to anyone, it is most certainly to listen to God. I wish could say I was very good at this. Unfortunately, I am a struggler, perhaps like many of us. I need the quiet and the motivation to daily read Scripture and attend to what God has to say.

The Basslers and Aubrey-Basslers are also being called anew to read the Scriptures for themselves and for their children; and all of us likewise, so that we might listen and learn. It's not that we understand everything we read. But we do give ourselves the media to be able to grow and to establish our roots firmly and strong in God and God's Word. Let's listen and enjoy.

Let us pray.