

“Let anyone with ears...”

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Let anyone with ears to hear listen ! Mark 4:9
Let anyone with ears to hear listen! Luke 14:35
Let anyone with ears listen!" Matt 13:9

Are you listening? Are you really listening?

Hearing these words we might immediately say, “well, yes, I’m here aren’t I?”

I’m sitting up straight and paying attention. But if we think about it we might say, well it all depends on what you mean by listening. Am I hearing your words? Am I understanding what I hear? Am I relating to what I hear?

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again; simple, honest, human conversation, not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate or public meetings; simple, truthful, conversation where we each feel heard, and we each listen well.

What would it be like to be listening to each other again; about what disturbs us, hurts us, silences us? About what gives us energy and hope? About our yearnings, our fears, our prayers, our children?

What would it be like to really listen to someone? To be still and present and take what they are saying without preparing our response? Without jumping in to fix it or amend it, but rather to sit on our own stuff and choose instead to just listen.

In her Book, “Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening”, Kay Lindahl reports that most of us spend about 45 percent of our waking hours listening, yet we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75 per cent of that time. Marketing studies indicate that the average attention span of adults is 22 seconds; think about our TV commercials, which usually last 15-30 seconds.

When someone finishes speaking we remember about half of what we have heard. Within a few hours we can only remember about 20 percent. If we think about it, really think about it, I’ll bet most of us would realize that actually we spend most of our time preparing to speak, rehearsing it in our minds, going over and over things but how much time do we spend preparing ourselves to listen

Deep listening is a forgotten art.

I am sure we can all come up with multiple examples of people not listening; husbands, wives and children, teachers and doctors and unfortunately even committee and annual meetings. We see the end results of this inability to listen in riots, war and genocide.

We are inundated with examples of poor listening in movies and on television. People constantly interrupt each other. Shouting seems to be the norm for convincing someone to do something or to establish a point of view. Most often, the one who is supposed to be listening is doing something else; working at the computer, reading the paper, working on a report, or engaged in some other activity other than just listening.

The use of sarcasm, humiliation, and put-downs is rampant. Most of the time, I have to turn the show off or avoid certain movies because I cannot tolerate the hurtful ways the characters treat one another.

A few years ago I had a conversation with a friend from Canada who told me she was making conscious choices to live more intentionally, with more integrity. I asked her what she meant by that and what it looked like.

“I have committed myself to stop all forms of sarcasm and teasing,” she said, “As a family, we have been working on speaking and listening to one another from our hearts and with deep respect. It is changing us. We trust one another more. We are less frightened to speak our truth. We are becoming kinder and gentler”

So what is listening?

Kay Lindhal says there are three aspects.

First - Listening is a choice.

Have you ever been listening to someone and then suddenly realize you haven't heard a word for the past minute or so? Or been the one speaking but know the other person is not really listening to you? Or have you found yourself preparing your response, anxiously waiting your turn to speak or interrupting so that you stop listening all together?

Listening is not about being quiet or even hearing the words. Listening is an action. It takes energy to listen. Listening takes discipline.

A professor at ANTS, Margaret Benefiel teaches several courses in Discernment - the spiritual practice of listening for God. Small groups come together and are a taught a technique used by Quakers called “A Clearness Committee”.

People gather for the purpose of deep listening. They begin by forming a circle and sitting in silence. Then one person speaks their concern, or their problem, seeking the group's wisdom. Without responding, the group just listens. When this person is finished the group can ask “clarifying questions”, questions to help them better understand the situation. Then everyone prays and sits in silence again. After a few minutes the group begins to respond, but they do not respond by giving advice or coming up with quick fixes, rather they ask questions. The questions are designed to take the person deeper into inviting God into the situation.

The person with the problem... just listens. They do not respond. They actively resist the urge to say, “yes but”, “I know, but”, “yes, but you see”, or other discounting responses. They sit and listen. And their clearness committee actively and consciously focuses on questions that will help this person discern. They also must resist their urge to “fix”, they do not offer solutions, they offer questions. “What are you afraid of?” “Who are you trying to please” “What are you hoping for?” “How will you change?”

And then the group prays together again. The experience is profound; absolute strangers engaging in something holy, something meaningful, something sacred.

The Holy Spirit is palpable

Let anyone with ears listen. Matt 11:15 Mark 13:43

The second way to define listening is that it is a gift.

In fact it is one of the greatest gifts we can give to one another. Think about a time when you felt someone was truly listening to you – not figuring out what to say next, not wishing you would hurry up so they could speak, or mentally reviewing all the things they needed to get to. The person was simply there, totally present and listening. What did you feel? Understood, whole, connected, joined, seen, validated, loved, and healed.

That is what we are all yearning for when we ask to be listened to. It is what we are all looking for in our desire to be heard.

And what about the person who is doing the listening? What do we feel when we offer someone our complete undivided attention and total presence? I feel blessed, enriched, honored.

Journalist Paul Hawken says, “When we listen to people our own language softens. Listening may be the cardinal act of giving...I think it is the source of peace. “

Thinking about listening as a gift that we either give or receive places a new value on listening.

Third, listening is an art.

When we think of describing something as an art we think of music, painting, dance, drama, poetry, drawing, and photography. We also refer to some actions or vocations as arts – the art of medicine, the art of teaching, the art of preaching. What do we mean when we say that? I don't think we are talking about the technique. I think we are talking about something deeper that happens that elevates the experience to an art.

It happens with listening too.

When two people listen deeply to one another, we have a sense that they are almost in another world, they are so totally present to one another that something beyond them happens. Some call this a holy experience, a sacred moment. It is as if time stands still and the space between them shrinks.

Musicians call this rapture, mystics call it ecstasy, athletes talk about being in the zone, and jazz artists say they are in the groove. They have totally given themselves over to the experience. It is the same with listening.

So how do we get there? How do we get into the zone? Practice. Anyone who wants to be good at something practices. Musicians, dancers, and athletes are always practicing. Many practice at least 4-6 hours a day. It is the practice that creates the miracles on the stage or in the field. It is the practice that makes a dancer take our breath away or cause our hearts to swell. It is the devotion of the athlete to their practice that makes their run a thing of beauty, as every muscle is synchronized, stretched and toned and they become a vision of grace.

A South African student named Steve at ANTS was present during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa. He spoke of the many black South Africans who came forward to testify to the atrocities they had suffered under apartheid and the power of their telling to heal them - story after story of unbelievable torture and loss.

And he also spoke of the ones who came forward to ask for forgiveness. The police, the torturers, the ones who had done horrific things. The ones that needed to tell their story and the ones that needed to listen. That was the whole point....listening and being heard. Listening, being heard, and healed.

Did you now that the word “hear” is used over 1100 times in the Bible? Half of those are in the New Testament.

Let everyone who has ears to hear ... listen **Mark 4:23 Mark 7:16**

Why is being heard so healing? I think it creates relationships. Mutuality, we see ourselves in the other. It builds trust. It encourages honesty. It breaks down the barriers between us and makes it safe to be vulnerable with one another.

Listening moves us closer, it helps us to become more whole, more holy, more like God intended. Whatever life we have experienced, if we tell someone our story, we find it easier to deal with our circumstances. Everybody has a story and everybody wants to tell their story in order to connect. But it doesn't just happen.

It takes practice.

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to another again.

Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29 - Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying²⁹

Rev. 3:6, 13, 22

Rev. 13:9 - Let anyone who has an ear **listen!**⁹