

A Life of Listening

Epiphany 2B - January 15, 2012

Today, we are going to tackle the subject of listening....A man asked his wife what she'd like for her birthday. 'I'd love to be eight again' she replied. On the morning of her birthday, he arose early and made her a bowl of Coco Pops and jammy toasties! He took her to an amusement park and put her on every ride in the park: the Death Slide, the Wall of Fear, the Screaming Monster Roller Coaster. Five hours later she staggered out of the theme park. Her head was reeling and her stomach felt upside down. Right away they journeyed to a McDonald's where her loving husband ordered her a Happy Meal with extra fries and a refreshing chocolate milk shake. Then it was off to the movies: the latest Kiddies three hour epic cartoon, a hot dog, popcorn, all the Coke she could drink, her favorite lolly and M&Ms. What a fabulous adventure! Finally she wobbled home with her husband and collapsed onto the bed exhausted. He leaned over his precious wife with a big smile and lovingly asked 'Well dear, what was it like being eight again?' Her eyes slowly opened and her expression changed to one of total realization...'I meant my dress size, you twit'!!!

Samuel & Nathanael: Question....How often do you pay intentionally seek to pay attention of the voice of God in your life? Do you think you have learned to discern the will of the Sacred? How often are you aware of the influence of the Holy Spirit in your thinking, in the choices you are making?

Both of our readings this morning tell stories about people who came to a place in their lives where the voice of the Sacred began to play a major role in the direction of their lives. Samuel was a young boy, an apprentice of Eli, a priest of Shiloh. His apprenticeship was part of a deal made between Samuel's mother & God; that if she was given a child by the Lord, she would give that child to God so that he might serve him. What Samuel does not know at this point in his young life is that he will grow up to become one of the great prophets of God. We don't know much about Nathanael's life before he shows up in today's Gospel lesson beyond the fact that he was a friend of Philip. Both Philip & Nathanael eventually become members of the 12, the inner circle of disciples of Jesus.

Both Samuel & Nathanael hear & respond to the voice of God in their lives. But this is easier said than done. How did Samuel & Nathanael learn how to hear the voice of the Sacred? How can you & I develop the particular kind of listening skill necessary to hear the quiet, gentle voice of the Sacred among the cacophony of all the other voices speaking to us every minute of every day....& they are legion?

Good News....It's Not About Effort or Perfection: The good news for all of us this morning is that it doesn't seem to have much to do with being a perfect person, walking six inches above the ground, being holy & sinless, or working really hard for a very long time. It seems to be something that young children & adult skeptics can learn; however, it may involve a bit of a learning curve. Samuel got it wrong for awhile. He repeatedly heard the voice of God, but did not recognize it as such & mistakenly attributed it to someone else. He was tuned in to the right frequency, the correct radio station, but he was completely unaware of it. It was not a conscious choice nor the result of many years of intentional practice & meditation. The voice of the Sacred seems to have been simply given to him without his knowing it. Nathanael's life-changing encounter with Jesus was also unintentional. A friend invited him to meet a new rabbi from Nazareth. Nathanael was willing, but skeptical & not expecting anything of import to happen; "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" What these two examples seem to be saying to us is that the ability to hear the voice of God is a gift given, not earned & that any & all of us can learn to hear the Holy One speaking to us because the Sacred lives in & speaks to all of us.

Listening to many voices: There are many kinds of voices speaking to us. Some are clearly & obviously not of God. These include the voices of those calling for: (1) war & the domination of others, (2) for the prioritizing of short-term financial gain through the exploitation of the poor, the workers & the long-term health of our precious planet, & (3) for

attitudes of suspicion & hatred directed at those who are different & those with whom we disagree. These & many others are voices that, while they may be loud & commonplace, are easily recognized something wholly other than the voice of the Sacred One.

Then there are those voices that are tougher to differentiate between sacred & non-sacred sources. These often show up as arguments, conflicts that attempt to work themselves out within our minds. These are difficult because each side of the issue being debated seems to have merit. Let me give you two examples; one quite simple & the other a bit more complex.

Meet Sally. Sally is an office manager of a small construction company. One of her jobs is to do the bookkeeping & keep track of the petty-cash kept in the office safe. It's Friday afternoon & Sally knows she has to rush to the grocery store to pick up a few items in preparation for having dinner guests that evening. She realizes that she has only two dollars in her wallet & that she left her credit cards at home. An argument begins in her mind; one voice argues in favor of "borrowing" \$40 from the petty-cash drawer for groceries...."Go ahead & take the 40 bucks from the drawer....No one will know & you can put it back on Monday morning." The other voice warns that this is a dangerous & unwise course of action; that indeed someone may find out causing her to lose her job; that such a step is the first in a potential chain of events that may lead to a pattern of repeated embezzlement of company funds...."Don't do this.....It's dangerous.....It's wrong!" Which is the voice of Sacred Wisdom & which is not?

Second example....Often times, hearing the voice & leadership of God in our lives involves discerning between two voices - each representing good things, noble things, honorable things. Here's a real-life example happening among us here at St. Luke's. Meet Sam. He is has been a member of our parish community for the past five years & normally attends worship two or three times a month. Three years ago he felt drawn to serve in one of our missions by becoming an Arts-Kids team member. Last year, he committed himself to move himself toward tithing by increasing his financial pledge 1% each year until he gets to 10%. He's noticed that, since the first of December, there has been an announcement every week calling for the members of our community to pray & discern whether they are being called to serve on the St. Luke's Vestry. If we could hear Sam's inner dialogue, we might hear something like this: "I would like to serve, but I am already working 55 hours a week. Every hour I give to the church is an hour I don't have to spend on my career & with my family.... But I feel drawn to do this....I think it may be what God is calling me to do.....No, I can't even think about that because it would mean less time for some of the things I want to do.....But I know if I say Yes to God, my life will be blessed & enriched....I am already so busy & I travel a lot....I have said I need to place a greater priority on my relationship with God & now here's my chance....Maybe I should submit my name...." Which voice is Sam's & which is the influence or leadership of the Sacred? How can Sam we tell?

The truth is, even when the argument is about two really good & honor things, if we take the time to sit in prayer, be quiet & still & open for awhile, 99% of the time we know, we can tell which is the leadership of the Sacred in our life. T

To close so let me suggest a few simple guidelines for discerning the voice of God in your own heart & life:

1. The voice of the Sacred is always that of love, faith, compassion, peace & forgiveness;
2. The voice of God is always accompanied by a sense that says, "This is the right thing to do. I may not know why or how this is going to work, but I know deep inside this is the right thing to do;"
3. The voice of the Holy One invites us to assume God exists, to risk trusting the leadership of the Spirit, to demonstrate courage by relinquishing a bit of control, loosening the reigns. relaxing the grip, & to reorder life's priorities in order to do what we are being called to do.

All of these are within our reach; all of us are capable of taking each of these steps. The only question is will we? And if not today, when? AMEN.