

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?

I recall a time in my earlier life when I worked in a bar during the summer months. As a teacher in those days, I didn't make a lot of money, so the extra income was helpful. Among our duties on the bar was answering the phone and often paging customers to take a call that had come in for them. And occasionally a wife would call, asking to speak to her husband, and we would call out his name. Sometimes he would say to us *Tell her I'm not here*. And we would then go back to the phone and say to the wife, *he says he's not here*. And then, begrudgingly, the man would get up and come to the phone, throwing us a menacing glance, and then have to deal with the call, not only in that moment, but no doubt again when he got home.

Well, there are probably times in all our lives when we don't want to answer calls. Our telephones, cell phones, ipads [and other devices] offer many avenues for people to contact us at any time. We sometimes let the *call waiting* feature become *call interruption*. And even in those times when we don't really want to engage, we sometimes still answer the call. We've become increasingly accustomed to immediate communications, even when call is not at all urgent or immediate. We sometimes forget that just because a sound tone goes off on one of our devices, we don't have to jump up and answer it – we still indeed have a choice. And beyond this is how electronic communications can decrease our personal and social responsibility to seek truth in what we say and hear. We see increasing numbers of accounts whereby our young people are can be subjected to bullying online, with often unsubstantiated and even false stories. Whereas in our earlier days rumours could be spread verbally and limited to those who actually heard them by word-of-mouth, our internet world today has destroyed any sense of validation and privacy. We no longer have to rely on what we hear in our ears –

cyberspace has changed the entire game of communication, perhaps both rightly and wrongly.

I was recently in the home of a friend who had installed a system whereby he could simply speak a command toward a device and have it respond. He showed me how it worked by saying *turn on the kitchen light*, and I was startled at how quickly the light came on. He then suggested to me that I make a request, so I asked it to play music from the Eagles, and in less than a couple of seconds, the music played. My friend was quite enthusiastic about this device, but I myself wondered about its ability to be listening to all his family's interactions, since it was always turned on and always listening.

Another concept of *hearing and responding* is the matter of integrity of the message. We hear of possible threats due to weather events, smog events and others, but when the events don't occur as predicted, we become less likely to react to them in the future...they lose credibility. [expand here through discussion]

Despite our modern technological ways of calling out and being heard, there indeed exists a deep need for interpersonal human interaction. No machine can offer sympathy, empathy and personal support and encouragement when we need it. Our human existence demands that we be heard in human terms and responded to in the same fashion. Numerous health and social advocacy groups call out to our governments to enact policies to support their causes, wanting to be heard. The *me2movement* is affording a venue to people who have been physically or sexually assaulted in the past to come forward and be heard. This past week a contingent of teens went to the U.S. White House to share directly with the President their fears and concerns about gun control and school safety. In Canada our Indigenous communities continue expressing their desire to have their needs

and concerns to be truly heard. And in our own interpersonal living, whether with families, friends and even strangers, *if we truly hear, do we respond, and if so, how?*

All of us at times get tired of being called upon. Our supply of energy and patience can run low, and we need quiet times to replenish. And after we've renewed ourselves, we can respond better to the demands of the outer world. But being tired is only one reason we don't want to respond to someone or something. Whether out of fear, ignorance, prejudice or indifference, we can often be tempted to walk away from the call. And sometimes for the sake of safety, we need to. But at other times, our instinct mandates that we respond. The challenge is often knowing when. In my past business trips to Toronto I often encountered homeless people, young and old, on the street begging for money. And I often felt conflicted, unsure as to whether to give or not. Was I doing them a favour by giving them money, or would I be doing more of a favour by pointing them to a shelter to get what they needed there?

So when does *hearing* become *listening*? Our scripture reading described how Samuel [1 Samuel 3] was being called by God, but it took him a while to figure it out. He kept going to Eli, thinking it was him who was calling. And after a few interactions, Eli advised Samuel to lie down again, and if he was to hear the call again, to invite God to speak, and encourage God to keep speaking. And Samuel did just that, encouraging God to keep speaking, with the pledge that *your servant is listening*. Perhaps the message here is that once we truly *hear* the call, our next step is to be silent and *listen*. Whatever life situation is facing us, whether it be in an interpersonal or business situation, we would be well served to step back, take some breaths, and *listen* to our inner core where our Creator speaks to us. And as we truly *listen* within, amidst all our fears, ambivalence and doubt, our path

forward can emerge and we can follow in confidence. Not necessarily without some fear and doubt, but with a deep and comforting assurance that we are truly listening to the Creator's direction.

So, let's look back at our experiment at the beginning of our service.

[when someone says.. *did you hear about..?*], what do we immediately think?

Do our expectations colour our experiences?

Do we believe something the more we hear it? [weather warnings; propaganda]

Can what we *hear* and what we then *pass on* lose its truth?

[experiments in class rooms . in English and French]

Another example is found in the scriptures. There are many different bibles in existence, offering differing accounts of events in Jesus' time. Some were written by those who observed events, and some who read or heard about them. There is much mis-interpretation of meanings in its stories, and fortunately modern Christianity has come to accept these writings as those of humans, and not as the literal word of God.

And so, how do the concepts of *hearing and listening* apply to us now, as individuals and as a congregation? Well, for us as individuals, we can commit to truly *hearing and listening* with others in our living. Accepting our own insecurities as part of our humanity can soften our inner stiffness when we feel the need to *get our backs up in defense*. Rather than plan our next statement in a conversation or debate, we can choose to simply *listen and hear* what the other person has to say. And as a congregation, we can be open to hearing the Creator's call. We thought we had heard it some years ago, and we planned our closing,

more than once. But we see now that we had mis-interpreted the message. A new call awaits us. For some reason, we're still being called to be a presence, right here on this corner. We can't predict where we will be in the future. But we can be open to hearing the needs of our faith community and beyond, listening in truth, and then responding. Like Samuel, we are hearing a new call from our Creator. Our next step is to listen, and then to respond. AMEN.

Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. February 25, 2018.

A Prayer of Willingness to Listen

Creator God,

So often I come to you with lists and demands.

Like a tornado I spew them out as commands.

To the next task, I move on with my day

Completely missing what you might have to say.

The noise of the world clogs my ears

And clouds my mind with fog and fears.

I need you to clear my senses, O Lord!

Give me a heart in tune with your Word.

May I be ever eager to hear your voice;

May listening continually be my choice.

Prayer from:

<http://rachelwojo.com/prayer-willingness-listen/>

Silent concerns

Lord's Prayer VU 960