

An elderly man went to his doctor about his loss of hearing. The doctor prescribed a tiny hearing aid that essentially cured the man's deafness. He came back to the doctor some weeks later, and the doctor asked him if his family was thrilled by his newfound hearing. "Well, I didn't tell them," The man answered. "I just sit around and listen. And so far I have changed my legal will three times." Hearing what goes on around you changes things. But just hearing by itself isn't enough.

A wife says with a tired voice, "I'm going out for a walk -- a long walk," a deep sigh, "-- a long, long, long walk." The husband says nothing. In a few hours she comes back and tells him how upset she is over a certain issue. He looks up from the paper and says, "Well, why didn't you tell me you were upset? Then I could have done something about it."

"Why didn't I tell you? Why didn't you hear me when I said I was going out for a long, long, long walk?" "I heard you, but you like to walk." The man had evidently heard her words -- but not well enough to understand the situation.

My Grandma claimed to be hard of hearing, and I think she was -- a little, but I think it was less of a physical problem than a useful tool. Grandma heard what she wanted to hear or it was useful to hear, and if it didn't appeal to her she didn't hear it. Relatives were always complaining that she was practically deaf.

I think she liked it that way because when I had the chance to visit her she could quote to me all sorts of things that people had been saying to her and around her.

She knew what they said and what they wanted, she just thought it was fun to be able to listen in to things they thought she couldn't hear and to be able to ignore things she didn't want to be bothered with.

It not just older folk who use that trick. Young folk who clearly do not need hearing aids can already play that same game. Sometimes they can just go on their way as if a conversation never happened, and sometimes they more subtly claim that they didn't really understand what you meant, or that you meant them, or that you meant right now.

I suppose we all do that sometimes: there are times when it is more convenient not to hear someone calling to us, or not to pay attention to what they want. Sometimes we don't even do it on purpose, but our attention is so focused on something else that we don't really have much energy left to devote to the people and circumstance around us. So there are times when out of habit we might hear, but don't listen.

You don't have to give me a show of hands but just as a test you might all check to see what you remember about the first reading we "heard" just about 5 minutes ago. Everyone in the room heard; but how many listened.

There are a lot of things we selectively don't hear, and we have to admit today that one of the voices we sometimes tune out, and in fact maybe only rarely tune in, is voice of the Lord:

His voice in the scripture passage that we can't even remember a few minutes later,

his voice in the church- a voice that we only listen to when it is something that we already agree with,

his voice in the poor and oppressed who question our selfishness, prejudice and priorities,

his voice in the pregnant teenager or the runaway child begging to be forgiven -- begging to be loved,

his voice in the anger of those whom we find it most difficult to love -- begging us to allow him to transform our hearts and heal our pride.

All of us are hard of hearing and there no "miracle ear" that will suddenly change that. It was easy for Jesus to cure a physical disability but he struggled his whole ministry to overcome people's unwillingness to listen and really hear his word.

A story is told of a family that went into a restaurant. The waitress walked up and, looking at the young boy, said: What will it be? The boy eagerly shouted back: "I'll take a hamburger, French fries, and a chocolate shake." The mother immediately interrupted: Oh, that's not what he wants. "He'll take the roast beef, a baked potato, and a glass of milk." Much to the surprise of both the mother and the boy, the waitress completely ignored her and again asked the boy: "And what do you want on that hamburger?" The boy shouted back, "ketchup, lots of ketchup." "And what kind of shake?" "Make it chocolate." The boy then turned to his parents with a big smile on his face and said: "Say, ain't she something. She thinks that I'm real!" Once you really start hearing people they are suddenly going to become real to you. They become the brother and sister the lord entrusted to your care.

The ability to detect sound is only the tiniest part of hearing. Listening and all the rest of the process takes effort and cooperation on our part. We can lock ourselves away; we can shield off some of the things that trouble us. And in a world as complex as ours we probably need to be able to do that occasionally. The problem is that at the same time that we hide from things that disturb us we also hide from the Word of the Lord that would heal and gladden us. On the lord's lips this day are the words, "Be opened." For that miracle to happen we must surrender to him in faith and allow his word to enter and touch us.

All of us have learned the trick to tuning out the things we don't want to hear, we do it so well that we miss a lot of things that we should hear, we need to hear. Before we can really follow the word of God we have to hear it. Our prayer today is a simple one: Lord help us to hear, really hear not just the words of scripture but also the voices of our brothers and sisters who speak your words each day.