

**Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
**September 6, 2015**

While it's one thing to *hear*, it's quite another thing to *listen*. Have you ever been part of a conversation and suddenly became aware that the other person may have been hearing you, but wasn't really listening? Or maybe we were the one who didn't listen, who didn't understand and appreciate what was being communicated.

For some of us, listening may be difficult because of a hearing impairment; this was the experience of the man featured in today's Gospel. Unable to hear, he couldn't listen to Jesus or even speak. Jesus' freed the man from his solitary silence and opened his ears.

Once healed, he couldn't help but to tell everyone about what Jesus had done for him. He had actually experienced the fulfillment of the messianic hopes that we heard about in our first reading.

Scriptur scholar Walter Brueggemann offered some important insights about listening and how listening was a particularly crucial notion in the faith of ancient Israel. He said listening isn't simply hearing but is the single-minded attentiveness of covenant partners to one another expressed in the Hebrew word *Shema*.

Which, by the way, is the perfect definition of the word "obedience".

So, to listen means to obey and to accept with great seriousness the will and intention of the other. This attentiveness begins with what has been called

the creed of Judaism, "Hear, O Israel" (Deut 6:4-9). Those called to listen are called to love with all their heart, soul and strength and to take to heart the life-giving word of God.

*Every* time we come together to worship, the call to this kind of listening is renewed.

But unless we take the word of God to heart, surrender to the call of the word, are willing to be transformed by the proclaimed word, and desire to respond to the word in faith and in service — then the word has been spoken in vain.

Through the centuries, God has used a variety of ways to gain the attention of humankind. For Moses, the burning bush was so fascinating that he couldn't help but listen; for the Israelites wandering in the desert, a pillar of fire at night, a cloud by day and occasional claps of thunder from Sinai got their undivided attention.

And through the following centuries, God's prophets and saints were pretty creative in their efforts to get people to listen; they sang, they persuaded, they told stories and they performed symbolic and miraculous actions. Ultimately, God's greatest attempt to be heard and heeded became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Because the sacred texts that we hear every time we come to Mass are living words that continue to have meaning for every generation of believers, we can easily insert ourselves in the place of the deaf man (or the blind or the lame

or shackled by sin) and being ministered to by Jesus. Jesus is eager to lead us “off by ourselves and away from the crowd,” if only we allow him.

There he invites us to show him our deepest wound, our greatest need, our most shameful sin. And when we have the courage to do so, we can be sure that we’ll never be met with a stern reproach, or contempt, or impatience.

On the contrary, we’ll be welcomed with love, and along with with prayer and patience we’re either healed or made stronger for whatever burden we have to bear. And then we’re called to do likewise for one another.

For St. Mark, the healing of the deaf and the cure of the blind man in the next chapter, signals the arrival of the messiah.

These stories of healing prepare us for Peter’s confession of faith: “You are the Messiah” that we’ll hear next week. If we’re listening.

The curing of the deaf man also calls us not to be deaf to the message of the Gospel. In a very personal and loving way, Jesus will take each one of us aside and minister to our inability to hear and to speak the good news.

In baptism, we were initiated into Christ. Though many of us were too young to remember, there is an important moment when the priest or deacon says, “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.”

Hearing isn’t just a physical act. We hear a lot of things and don’t really *listen* to them. At baptism, we were charged to “receive” God’s word and to

“proclaim” it. If we truly love Jesus and invite him every day into our hearts, if we’re willing to be his instruments of healing to everyone we meet, we can have absolute confidence in the fact that he will always be there to help us every step of the way.