

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Bruton Parish Church  
The Rev. Ronald P. Jaynes, Interim Rector  
February 14, 2010

I don't know if this is a true story, but here it goes:

Franklin Delano Roosevelt frequently complained that no one really paid any attention to what he said as they greeted him in long receiving lines at the White House.

One day at a reception he decided to try an experiment. As each person came down the line and shook his hand, he murmured: "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like: "Marvelous." "Keep up the good work." "We're proud of you." "God bless you, sir."

It was not until the end of the line when he was greeting the Ambassador from Bolivia that his words were actually heard. Not sure what he should say, the Ambassador leaned over and whispered: "I'm sure she had it coming."

Listening. Listening is such an integral part of the communication process, but we don't usually do it very well.

We hear the sounds coming from the other person's lips, but we often miss the meaning. Or like so many parents, children, spouses, coworkers, we complain that no one listens to us.

Do you know the organization based in Baltimore called "Listening Hearts?" They have published some useful material and lead workshops seeking to help Christians listen to one another with their hearts as well as their ears. They have a list of eleven basic guidelines for groups of people to use when they are having discussions about issues before them. One of those guidelines I find particularly challenging to follow reads: Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking. Is that hard for you to do as well? But it makes sense doesn't it? How can I really listen to you, try to understand what you say, where you are coming from, if my mind is really waiting to pounce back with my own winning point?

Good listeners respect others and value their opinions. We don't see this modeled very much in our public life today. But careful listeners try to stay inquisitive about each other, and remember that they can usually learn from others, even if they disagree.

Good listening takes it slow and easy ... a pace we often find difficult, irritating, and a waste of time. Then, of course, there is the way much so-called communication happens today – email.

Now, I really value the way electronic communication allows us to keep in touch with people in a quick and easy way. But it is not a good way to have a dialogue with another person.

In the story of the Transfiguration we find Peter having an amazing encounter with Moses and Elijah, and Peter is thinking that, well, he just has to say something ... blurting out an idea to capture the moment. Luke writes: While Peter was speaking, a voice came from the cloud telling Peter and us: For heaven's sake, this is my Son, LISTEN to him. Or maybe it was more like: Peter, for heavens sake be quiet and listen for a change. So here is a starting idea for your Lenten rule of life ... and it promises to be way more beneficial to your spiritual well-being than giving up chocolate, is to give God the gift of some of your time and do what he asked Peter to do.

LISTEN TO HIM.

Tony Campolo writes that he is increasingly attracted to some of the old ways of praying that were not part of his Baptist childhood. He says that all he learned to do while praying was to go through a litany of non-negotiable demands to the almighty. He says that his prayer wasn't far removed from that of his six year old son, who came into the living room one night and said: I'm going to bed. I'm going to be praying. Anyone need anything? Martin Luther spoke of the difficulty of consecrating on the discipline of listening for God. When his puppy happened to be at the table, he looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes. Luther said: Oh if I could pray the way the dog watches the meat. All his thought is given to the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope.

What a simple Lenten rule: This is my son. Listen to him.

One way to practice listening for the voice of God in our lives is to be open these next weeks to listening to those around with greater care. Before you tell them what you think about a certain issue, listen with your heart to what they are saying to you. Somehow I believe it must be true that, if we cannot really listen to each other, we will find it impossible to listen for the voice of the Spirit.

There are many opportunities for you to learn and grow as a Christian here at Bruton during the weeks of Lent that are about to begin. Sunday forums, daily Morning Prayer, weekday Communion services, Wednesday book study, Thursday soup suppers and discussions – you will find them detailed in the bulletin and special issue of The Chronicle – but I suggest that we cultivate a listening heart for each other and to the Lord ... as our primary Lenten rule ... it will change us ... and help us to be ready to reaffirm on Easter our Baptismal promise to live the way of Jesus.