

LISTEN

***“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:
Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak
and slow to become angry”
James 1:19***

I was having lunch with a friend one day and sat there, hunched over my meal, preoccupied with a long list of items from what was an unbelievably long week. Suddenly my friend, who had known me for as long as I had been in the Cleveland area said, “You haven’t heard a thing I’ve said,” and to my complete embarrassment, I realized she was totally correct.

How could I not be listening? There was no doubt it had been a horrible week, my stress level was high, it was too long since I had taken a day off, but all of that aside I knew better. After all, I’m usually the one who continually points out to youth, to people in general, that they need to actively listen to what those around them are saying. But on that particular day and in that particular moment I was the one who needed the reminding; the centering back to what was important. I needed to push everything else aside and give this dear friend the attention she deserved. So, in an effort to do exactly that I immediately stood up, shook my whole body, sat back down, took a few deep centering breaths and said, “Okay, I am so sincerely sorry. I am with you now and I am listening.”

Together we laughed. It was kind of a joke, but it worked. I suddenly forgot about the horrible week and found it very easy to be really focused on what she was saying. Lunch lasted its normal two-hour duration, and when I left, I realized that just listening, really listening, and responding to her story had made me feel so much better. My all too serious list of situations from the week were still there, but they didn’t seem so urgent anymore. I knew that her being able to really share what was going on in her life had helped her. Nothing really had changed, but in some strange way, on some deep level, everything had changed.

From time to time I think about that situation. It truly wasn’t one of my finer moments, and I can still feel a little sense of disappointment in myself all these years later as I recall it. But at the same time, my friend calling my attention to what was happening was a valuable life lesson and I was grateful for that loving, yet pointed reminder.

I read once that listening is an “act of kindness” not only to the other person but also to ourselves. The article went on to say, “It takes us out of our self-focus to offer empathy to the other person, and at the same time reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering. When we listen well, we are able to both offer solace, companionship, and support, and at the same time to remember that we are really a part of a much larger community.”

I wish I had the ability to do for others what my friend did for me that day so long ago. As I step back and look at our world right now, it appears to me that people in general don't seem to be practicing any deep listening skills. So many aren't hearing one another and that is true in so many different arenas, and on so many different levels. Wouldn't it be great if we could all just jump to our feet, shaking it off, and after a few deep cleansing breathes focus our attention to where it needs to be? Somehow and some way we need to get to that depth of respect where we can just simply listen to each other's concerns, ideas, revelations, pains, and struggles. A place where we can be engaged and focused enough to truly listen to one another, hearing what is being said.

So, with that in mind, I want to encourage each and every one of you to take the opportunities in your day to truly listen. If you need to jump up, shake it off, and breathe – go for it – do whatever it takes for you to give your undivided attention to whoever it is that sits beside you or in front of you; or even six feet away from you. Even if you are masked, or it's for a brief period of time, or it's while grabbing a cup of coffee, just simply listen to that other person. Let their voice be the only thing present in those moments.

Oh, and one more important point before I close Please don't forget at the end of that exchange to take a moment to realize what has happened to you in the process. Just like me, you might find yourself being a bit surprised by the outcome.

Prayer:

Gracious God,

Help us to open our minds, our ears, and hearts that we might truly listen to one another.

Amen