

May God grant us all the kind of obedience the boy Samuel walked in, to grow in knowing undoubtedly that the Lord is with us—so that when we speak, none of our words fall to the ground. As for me, I will wait silently before Him. I will listen. I think I heard Him call my name. Can you hear yours? Amen!

Your Servant is Listening

Human Relations Day is a reminder that we are one human community. It is a “kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” day. It is an opportunity for us to put our money where our mouth is. The offerings we collect on this day are used to support community development efforts, voluntary services programs, and youth offender rehabilitation programs. It’s an opportunity for us to remember that we are called to be listening to the voices around us—just as Samuel had to learn.

Poor Samuel. He was caught up in something that was bigger than he was. It was something that was shaping the life of the whole people of God. But he didn’t know it. He was just a kid, doing what he was told. He didn’t have any sense of the big picture. He didn’t know what was behind the scenes, what was underneath the daily duties he performed without question, or what was above the ceiling that caught wisps of smoke from the lantern in the holy place. All he knew was duty, and he did it—mostly because there wasn’t anyone else to do it. Eli, his mentor, was going blind and could no longer perform the duties of his office. And Eli’s sons, who should have been stepping up to fulfill those duties, had already made such a mess of their power and authority that faith in the institution of the priesthood was at a very low decline. But Samuel just did his job. No matter what was swirling around him, he performed his duties. And this was the result.

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days.” That seems to be an odd sort of beginning for a story that takes place in the temple of the Lord. And yet, there it is. So, Samuel’s days were filled with the thousand little details that Eli could no longer perform to keep the rituals ready for the people of God, who were like sheep without a shepherd because “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.”

That makes you wonder what people turned to when they didn’t have access to the voice of God, doesn’t it? What sorts of authority did people call on? What sorts of diversions did they obsess over? What sorts of voices did they listen to? To fill the empty nights and cover up the loneliness of living, what sounds did they ache for?

Living a directionless life is draining as well as pointless. It messes with your sense of self-worth as well as emptying you of ambition and hope. So, what are we left with these days, when “the word of the Lord is rare”? Are we just supposed to generate our own direction? Are we left to our own devices? It is, indeed, all about us, after all.

Or do we listen deeper? Is there something to hear after all? We’ve convinced ourselves that what we see is what we get, or this is all there is, or ... whatever. But even though the word of the Lord is rare, even though those who are supposed to speak for the Lord are going blind, the “lamp of God has not yet gone out.” We may have given up on God, but God has not given up on us.

The Voice still calls. It may be night in our souls, the darkness of doubt and fear and emptiness, but the Voice still calls. That is what our faith tells us when our ears are weary of listening to the silence. But then, there isn’t any silence anymore, is there? That may be why we don’t hear, not because it is too quiet, but because it is too loud. It’s loud in our world with distractions aplenty, voices calling, blaming, warning, vying for our attention. It’s loud in our souls, where we are filled with our own questions and fears, filled with our own failures and inadequacies. It is so loud we don’t hear the Voice anymore, the Voice that leads and comforts, the Voice that challenges and guides. We don’t hear it anymore because we’ve stopped listening. Or if we do hear it, it sounds just like all the other voices around us. No wonder Samuel thought he was hearing Eli. No wonder we think it is

a spouse or a friend, or a book we read, or a song we heard. No wonder we thought it was indigestion or an impulse to do something really crazy. Because we've forgotten how to listen for the Voice.

When Eli finally (finally!) figures out what is going on, he begins to teach; he begins to mentor. Instead of using Samuel as someone to do the grunt work, to clean now and ask questions later, he finally begins to introduce him to the source of the Voice. He names that source, "Lord." Say "Speak Lord," says Eli, "That's what you say. That's the beginning of putting yourself within hearing distance of the Voice." And then, having identified the source, put yourself in the position— "your servant," the one who follows, the one who obeys, the one who does. "Your servant is listening," that's what you say, explains Eli. You say, "I know who you are, I know who I am, and I want to hear what you have to say. I want to be led; I want to be taught. I want to be claimed."

It isn't easy, Samuel gets it wrong at first. "Speak, your servant is listening." He missed the address, missed the identification. But that's ok; that will come. Because it comes from a servant's heart. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.

Nathaniel wasn't listening; that's obvious. His ears were full of the common wisdom of his day. He knew who was in and who was out. He could recognize a scam, something too good to be true. He'd been burned before, perhaps. He just knew that nothing good came from the sticks. Or the north. Or that side of the tracks. He knew where he could hear something worth listening to and where he was wasting his time. So, when Philip invites him and gushes over this hick from the country, Nathaniel rolls his eyes and snorts.

But he goes. Now there's a thing, don't you think? He was sure there wasn't anything in it. He was as cynical as the average guy on the street, but he went. Was it because of his friend who asked him? Maybe. Probably. Or maybe it was because behind the cynical shell, there was still an ear willing to listen to a voice that would speak into his emptiness. Maybe there was enough hope, not quite buried, that caused him to shuffle along behind Philip, grumbling all the way but secretly wanting it to be true. How else do you explain the amazing turnaround? Jesus says something odd – "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." And Nathaniel asks, "How do you know me?" Does Jesus avoid the question? "I saw you under the fig tree" hardly seems like an answer to the "how" question. Something is going on here. Something that we might not see, something that might be beyond the written words. It sounds like an harmless response, but it leads to a confession of faith. How does that happen? Who knows? Somehow Nathaniel heard something that he was listening for. He didn't seem to come with a "Speak Lord, your servant is listening," and yet that exchange turned his life around.

Maybe the lesson here is that we shouldn't make assumptions. When we look around at our community, we think these folks want nothing to do with us. They don't care about our message. They won't want to belong, to connect. So, we don't bother because we know how it will go. But perhaps Samuel and Nathaniel have a different message. Keep speaking, keep inviting, keep telling your story. Who knows who is really listening? Amen.