

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 21, 2002

**Conversations with God”**  
Psalm 139; Romans 8:12-27

I came home from the church the other day  
and asked Mary Ellen how her day with the kids had been.  
As soon as I asked and saw her face I knew I wasn't going to get an upbeat response.  
She said her ears hurt, and that they were literally hurting – in pain – at that moment.

You see, James – at 2 ½ year old –  
is discovering the joy of expressing himself through language  
which he is combining with the formidable volume he's always possessed.  
He's putting sentences together like never before,  
and I guess he wants to make sure someone hears them.  
This, of course, means his sister now has competition.  
Now that James talks back to her, and talks to Mommy and Daddy,  
and talks just to talk,  
Langley no longer has full control of the airwaves.  
Now there are two mouths that run from dawn until dusk, and sometimes into the night.

It can be a challenge, when this spirited dialogue gets going,  
for Mom or Dad to get a word in edgewise  
whether we're trying actually to speak to the kids or just to each other.  
You know how it goes, getting the attention of a young child,  
either to quiet them, or what's more of a challenge,  
to get the child to listen to what the parent is saying.

I guess we all, as children, develop the ability to talk  
before we learn the art of conversation.

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I think we can say the same about ourselves as children of God.  
We learn to talk to God, before we learn the art of conversation with God.

The Apostle Paul describes our relationship with God like this:  
*...All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God  
For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear  
but you have received a spirit of adoption.  
When we cry “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit  
that we are children of God.*

That is, when we cry out to God, when we pray,

not only are we speaking to God,  
God is speaking to us.

Marjorie Thompson has written a book on the Christian spiritual life called *Soul Feast*  
(which I hope one of our small groups will take up for study one day).

In the chapter on prayer, Thompson says that

“no matter what we think about the origin of our prayers,  
they are all a response to the hidden workings of the Spirit within.”

So that “perhaps our real task in prayer

is to attune ourselves to the conversation already going on deep in our hearts.

Then we may align [ourselves] with the desire of God

being expressed at our core.”<sup>1</sup>

Simply put, prayer is conversation with God.

This may be one of the harder aspects of the Christian spiritual life to realize

because conversation is a more difficult art than the simple ability to speak.

Prayer as conversation is more than our monologue in God’s ear;

in prayer we listen as well as talk.

Yet we are not very practiced, as modern people, in the art of listening in general

much less the art of listening to God.

It’s no wonder, because listening to God is hard work.

It takes time, which seems to be in short supply these days.

And it takes patience, which is not encouraged these days

when Internet search engines bring us instant information

at the click of a button

and the remote control delivers to our couches

a mind-numbing selection of every kind of entertainment

and cell phones let us talk to anyone, anywhere, at anytime.

In a world that moves this fast,

who has time to sit around listening for a voice from heaven?

It seems a waste of time.

But if the Bible is true, the Spirit of God is already praying within us.

The conversation between God’s Spirit and our spirits is taking place all the time.

If we can learn to listen to this conversation,

we can be in touch with God and God’s will for us.

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But how do we listen for God? How do we pay attention to the Spirit at work within us?

If we take our cue from Paul,

then the “how” has something to do with the joy and pain we experience

in this life of blessing and woe.

Because just after Paul talks about the Spirit at work within us,

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, p. 31.

he talks about the sufferings of the present time  
and how the Spirit gives us glimpses in this life – in the midst of suffering –  
of the glory of God’s kingdom  
Listening to the Spirit has to do with the ups and downs of our daily living,  
our moment by moment experience of life.  
We listen to the Spirit by paying attention to our life in the world.  
a world whose pains are really birth pangs, the pains of labor,  
pains that look forward in hope to the joy of new birth, new life.

Paul was looking squarely at his life in the world when he said,  
*I consider that the sufferings of this present time  
are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.*  
In the face of great suffering that Paul was able to hope  
*that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay  
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*  
Paul was able to hope because, in the face of all the pain his life had to offer,  
he listened to the Spirit of God  
who reminded him that he was a child of God  
and that the children of God have a great inheritance in store for them.

So we listen to the Spirit, not by removing ourselves from the world,  
but by attending to the world, and our life in it.  
In the gentle music of the morning, we hear God’s invitation to peace.  
In the words of encouragement offered by a friend, we recognize God’s blessing.  
In the face of difficulty we ask, “What is God saying to me in this?”  
When feelings of fear or guilt rise up within us,  
we ask, “How is the Spirit leading me through this just now?”  
We entertain the idea that a troubled mind, or an uplifted mood,  
or a strong desire to speak to someone  
may be the leading of the Spirit.  
We remain open to the possibility that even our daydreams or our night dreams  
might reveal to us the workings of God’s Spirit within us.  
Nothing in our experience, absolutely nothing, is exempt  
from being used by the Spirit of God for our good and the good of God’s world.

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Of course, there is a great need for discernment in this art of listening.  
Discernment of which voice is God’s voice,  
and which voices come from some other source.  
(You understand, I don’t mean literal voices –  
if you actually are hearing voices in your head,  
please come see me and I will be glad to refer you)  
I mean how do we discern which of our thoughts and feelings are from God  
and how do we discern when others are actually speaking on God’s behalf?

There can be only one answer for the Christian believer, and for the church.  
We listen knowing that the Spirit of God will say things that are consistent  
with who we know God to be in Jesus Christ.  
As God's children, we will never be led by the Spirit  
to depart from the way of our brother Christ.  
The voice of the Spirit is always consistent with the life and teaching of the Son  
who always shows us the way to the Father.  
So attending to the Spirit's voice within us cannot be done  
apart from giving attention to what Jesus said and did and suffered.  
And our first source of knowledge of Jesus is the scripture.  
Listening to scripture teaches us to attend to the experiences of our lives  
and to discern the voice of God.  
Listening to God without reading the Bible is like playing golf without a ball –  
it leaves too much to the imagination!<sup>2</sup>  
Not that we have to have the Bible open in front of us to hear God's voice,  
but the words of God's Spirit will use what we have learned from scripture  
to guide us.  
That is to say, the Spirit and the Word work together,  
and the Spirit needs something in us to work with.

And finally, we do not listen to God's Word, or God's Spirit, in isolation.  
We always listen as members of the church, members of one another.  
*We need each other* in discerning the voice of the Spirit.

This is why we Presbyterians are a connectional church,  
because we believe that if we try to listen to the Spirit as isolated individuals  
or even as an isolated congregation,  
we can easily distort the voice of the Spirit  
to say what we want it to say,  
and without the larger community that distortion is left unchecked.  
We are parts of the body,  
and all the members must work together in hearing the voice of God.

So there is a balance to be found between praying alone and praying with others,  
reading the Bible alone and reading it with others.  
And sometimes, like a 2 year old who needs to stop talking and listen to his mother,  
we need to learn when just to be quiet and listen.

At the Session meeting this past week,  
we had been energetically discussing an issue before us  
with a great deal of participation from many members  
who were sharing their thoughts and feelings about the topic,  
as good Session members should do,  
when one member of the Session said,  
"Since we're seeking to discern what God wants

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<sup>2</sup> A favorite saying of Dr. Paul J. Achtemeier of Union Seminary, except his game was tennis.

wouldn't it be appropriate for us to spend some time in prayer?"

Perhaps this member thought God's ears were beginning to hurt,  
perhaps all of our ears were beginning to hurt a little.  
But in response to this wisdom we did end up spending about 5 minutes  
in silent prayer, listening to discern God's Spirit.  
I have to admit to feeling a bit anxious –  
it was getting late, and there was still work to do.  
But sometimes the discipline of prayer is to limit our words  
and give God room in the conversation.

Other times we pray so much we run out of words.  
And when we do, God's spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words.  
The Spirit of God bears witness with our spirits,  
calling us right in the midst of the noise and busy-ness and rush of life  
to listen.

Prayer is speaking and listening in conversation with God.  
In closing, I cannot think of any better instruction than that given by  
Marjorie Thompson, who reminds us that prayer is  
“like most things, we learn best by doing it...  
the most important thing is to keep on praying [speaking and listening to God],  
even if it feels artificial at times.  
[And always] expect to learn in the process.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson, p. 31.