

Sept. 3, 2006
James 1:17-27
First Parish Church
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The Labor of Listening

One afternoon this past week, I went to Popham beach with our daughters, Lauren and Karin, who are now 21 and 17. What a different experience from going to the beach with them when they were young! First of all they drove. Everyone carried their own stuff. When we got to the beach, we each settled down on our towels and, in silence, rested for an hour and a half. Wow!

I dozed off and on. Then, with today's passage in mind I decided to try to really listen to what was going on around me. There was the occasional seagull squawking, the steady and rhythmic pulse of the waves crashing on the shore, and the murmur of human voices. As I listened more closely to the voices I realized one person nearby was talking on his cell phone, two elementary aged children were challenging each other to a race, and two preschool children were not listening to their father.

These preschoolers, a brother and sister, had found some toys that belonged to other children, but were playing with them nonetheless. The father, standing a ways away, called over to them, "Put those down." They ignored him. In a few moments, he said it again, more sternly this time. They still didn't put them down, and because they were closer to us than the father, I could hear the little boy say under his breath to his sister, "We do what we want." The

father didn't hear him. A few minutes later the father came over and took the toys away from them. Listening was not the primary *modes operandi* in this situation.

One of the bits of wisdom conveyed in today's passage from James is, "let everyone be quick to listen." The labor of listening is a work that parents and children are engaged with on a daily basis. And, it's not always the children who are not listening. How many times have your children finished telling you a story and you realize that you heard words coming out of their mouth, but you didn't really listen to what they had to say?

Obviously, this is not a new struggle in human community. The writer of James, almost two thousand years ago was reminding people of how important it is to listen. Jesus, himself, often said, "Let those who have ears to hear, listen!"

Yet, in our age of noise pollution, it isn't getting any easier to listen carefully. Since New Testament times, we have added so many sounds that we hear:

- telephones, including ones that go with us everywhere – the ubiquitous cell phone
- radios and televisions, so you can have background noise going on all the time in your house

- ipods and other personal listening devices, so you can carry the sound with you on a walk or run
- cars, trucks, trains and planes, and sirens
- jackhammers and other building equipment
- and the list goes on.

Most of us probably listen to fewer animals on a daily basis than biblical folk, but the amount of artificial sounds we have created is overwhelming. Much of the time it blocks out the very sounds of nature. And with so much sound stimulating our ears, it's not surprising that we often find it hard to really sit and carefully listen to one another.

Now, I want you to know that I sense the irony of this sermon. Here I am talking about listening. So, I want to change the dynamic. (*walk down into the congregation*) I want to listen to you. I invite you to think about someone you know who is a good listener. What is it that makes them a good listener? Let's think silently for a few moments and then I would be interested to hear what came to mind. (*have time for people to share*)

This fall, the Spiritual Practices Group, which will be meeting on Monday mornings, is using a book called *Spiritual Fitness: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*. Chapter one is "Listening." I first read this book several years ago. There is a story in the first chapter that I've never forgotten. Lucy is the single parent of a twelve year old girl. Lucy had struggled against enormous odds to survive the complicated birth of her daughter twelve years before, but now Lucy is dying and in a great deal of physical pain. When

her pastor arrives at the hospital she says to him, "Don't say anything. And don't hurry." (pg. 7) He followed her advice.

As people on a spiritual journey, we realize that in listening to others we are also learning to listen to ourselves, and to listen to and for God – to the workings of the Spirit deep within us and among us.

Sometimes, maybe Lucy's advice would be good for all of us in paying attention to God. Maybe we should remind ourselves sometimes, "Don't say anything. And don't hurry."

We teach our children to say prayers of blessing: *God bless Mommy and Daddy, and Spot and Fluffy*. We teach them that God will always listen to them. But do we also invite them into the mystery of listening for and to the Holy? That's much harder. It's much more mysterious. It truly is a labor – a work-of-the spirit to listen for that "still small voice" that can come in most surprising and even unsettling times and ways. And sometimes it comes in "the sound of silence."

