

Sermon: Listening to God's Will

1st Reading

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days, the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

2nd Reading:

Revelation 3:20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Listening to God's Will

November 11, 2001
San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
Rodrigo Marcus
1 Samuel 3:1-10; Revelation 3:20

We all know the difference between listening (said casually) and listening (slow emphasis). We use the first type when we are getting ready in the morning for work: listening to the radio or the TV, maybe conversing with our partner, while perhaps making breakfast or getting dressed, or ... all of the above! But then there's the other type, when we really listen. We find ourselves focused in the moment and empathetic with the feelings of another. The September 11th tragedy is a good example of how we found ourselves listening with the fullness of ourselves; we felt the pain and loss either directly or indirectly, and experienced it in our bodies. When we listen with full awareness in the moment, the quality of listening becomes a quality of loving. And when we listen to God, or more specifically, listen to God's will for us, we can cultivate a more satisfying and loving experience of life.

Often when we think of God's will, we capitalize the word Will and put it out of reach on a pedestal. For example, we're familiar with the words from our Lord's prayer, "Thy will be done." But perhaps we are not sure exactly what is this "Will" that we are asking to be done? The opposite of this involves belittling God's will, where we expect God to align His will with our will. You might have come across someone who was saying something like, "Oh God, help me win the lottery! ... Please!"

What I would like to explore is neither of these, but instead a type of listening that is more intimate and connecting. By cultivating a deeper listening attitude, we can experience our own will in a more pure way. And it is in this way that we can connect with God's will.

Saying it more directly, God's will is our *highest* expression of love and truth in every moment of our lives. How can it be anything else? First of all, how can God wish for us anything but His own qualities of love and truth? And secondly, how can God wish for us something different from who we are, different from our own character? His will is inline with the highest understanding that we each believe ourselves to be. We can be sure that when we express the most loving and truthful action possible, He is guiding us in becoming more loving, patient, sensitive, and charitable.

I found a wonderful expression of this idea from Jeffrey Gaines, who is the President of Spiritual Directors International. He writes: "God will [not] give us 'what we want, like some genie in a lamp.' No, God does not work this way. But, when we are attentive to what makes our *soul shimmer* and our *spirit dance*, we are actually doing God's will for us – which is 'our heart's desire' – for it is God's desire for us." Think of how Mozart would have felt had he chosen a career as a store clerk. He might have done very well at it. But by following his highest will, he must have felt the dancing of his spirit, and we benefited from this too, his highest expression of who he believed himself to be.

Listening, to what makes our hearts sing, includes a combination of presence and patience. It requires our full awareness to the subtle feelings and intuitions that stir within. Many of you probably already have ways in which you listen to God, which may include praying, meditating, or contemplating. Or maybe other ways like writing in a journal, walking in nature, reading scripture, talking with a spiritual director, or listening to your dreams. Emanuel Swedenborg writes how everything is but a portal into the divine. Well, then this is our opportunity to find the portal through which we each personally connect with God. Swedenborg found that one of his favorite ways of listening was through his dreams. His Journal of Dreams shows how he both listened to and discerned God's will in this manner. But, I'll leave that for another sermon. With our minds endlessly chasing thought after thought each day, and our feelings doing the same, we rarely spend the time to quiet our minds and listen to what God might want to say to us. Listening to God asks us to be present to where we are in the moment, to become aware of what we are thinking and feeling, and then, in a way, to rise above them. When I was a kid, for my prayers I would bring my hands together and *talk to* God. There's nothing wrong with that. However, as an adult, instead of petitioning God, perhaps I might be open to *communing with* God. In other words, after talking with God, maybe we can listen with an open heart. Even if we don't "hear" anything, God knows we are honoring that time with Him, that we are leaving the door open for him Him to come in. Perhaps he is there and we just can't hear him. As we find in the New Testament reading from the Book of Revelation, Christ is knocking at our door. My door (pause), your door (pause), President Bush's door (pause), Osama bin Laden's door (pause). The Lord is calling each of us to open the door to our hearts and our minds. If we are sensitive enough to hear Him knocking, to hear His voice, and if we choose to open the door, He will make Himself at home inside our hearts. His presence will help us discern truth more clearly, and express love more sensitively and courageously in our lives. That's His desire, and that's our heart's highest desire.

I recently came across a good example of deep listening through contemplation. Two months ago I was watching a PBS program where Bill Moyers was talking with Sister Wendy, the famous British connoisseur of fine art. She shared with him her way of opening up and sensitively listening to a painting. It's a way that we can similarly use to intuitively listen for that which makes our spirits dance. Sister Wendy spends the necessary time deeply contemplating each painting she wants to experience. For example, if she wants to contemplate a painting by Paul Cézanne, who is one of her favorite artists and who she feels created sacred art, she will start by looking at the painting for a small period of time, say twenty minutes or more. She will listen to her inner reactions coming up from within. At first she says she might see her ego, like her thoughts and feelings about Cézanne's life history. She promptly let's go of these because they are responses of habit and conditioning. Then she goes away and returns later, possibly hours or days, to look at the painting again. She repeats this until she senses her most authentic and most pure reaction emerging. Eventually she experiences the most beautiful feeling emanating from her heart and she knows the authenticity of it. Opening up this portal to the divine involves letting herself become as open as an

innocent child, while including her wisdom as an adult. This requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to be honest, and to be changed.

This is a wonderful example of how we too can listen deeply. When we have a big decision, or for example, a problem with a close friend or family member, we can hold the person in our hearts, contemplate a photo of the person, or write our thoughts and feelings down in a journal. When we do this, it is important to take the necessary time to listen quietly to the responses inside. As we see our reacting feelings and thoughts, we need to be honest and ask ourselves if they convey the highest quality of who we believe ourselves to be as loving and truthful persons. Being honest requires letting go of what is oftentimes the ego's desire for control, power, fame, or fortune. Let go of these, and by waiting patiently for more authentic feelings to emerge, we can find God's will and our will meeting in our hearts. From this we will begin expressing more easily the qualities of love, honesty, sensitivity, charity, and patience with others.

Another style of listening comes from one of the most insightful scientists of the last century, Albert Einstein. He had said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science." Here is a man who would often take time to experience the mysterious on long walks in nature. He was fond of them and used them to relax and to let his mind wander into the realm of the mysterious through his imagination, sparking insights like the one that led to his Theory of Relativity. We too can often use a walk to get away from our concerns at hand. And with a breath of fresh air, we can open ourselves up to our intuition.

This reminds me of the feeling of play-time. When was the last time you felt you were "playing"? Remember when you were a child and were playing gleefully with your toys? Those were times when your spirit was dancing; your intentions were pure and open. Well, think of that feeling of play the next time you take a walk. If you find yourself in a park, let the beauty of nature be your portal into the divine. Relax, be playful, and welcome the insights that come.

Let me take a moment to briefly mention a few thoughts about free will. Once you have an insight, you still need to decide if that insight is aligned with your highest understanding of who you believe yourself to be. Emanuel Swedenborg frequently identifies our need to use our God-given faculties of mind and heart to discern the quality of love and truth within each of our statements, actions, or decisions. Love and truth are needed together. Otherwise, if we neglect the quality of love, we can rationalize the truth of anything we want. For example, look at our culture's recent history and see how a reliance on rationalized truth without love is threatening the ecology of the earth. So, listen, and then discern.

I'd like to share with you a personal example that conveys the notion of listening with presence and patience. A few years ago my employer asked me to go out to a customer's site, to learn how to administer new telephone equipment, and then to train the customer on doing it. However, my company did not want the customer to know that I had never used this equipment before. Well, I accepted, thinking it would be easy enough given my familiarity with similar gear. Unfortunately, when I went on-site a few hours early, I saw that very little was prepared. As I attempted to set it up, the customer continually asked my assistance in other areas, which slowly ate away the

time. It came down to the last hour, and I began to panic. So, I began to pray. I communicated to the Lord my highest intention for both the customer and myself, and then I let it go. Oddly enough, I didn't feel concerned about the outcome, and felt a peaceful sense of being present. Whenever I felt myself starting to worry, I just repeated my prayer, and released it into God's hands, knowing that I was doing the best I could. ... And then something happened. With about a half-hour left, the customer contact came rushing up to me asking if it would be OK to postpone the training to the following hour. Apparently, one of their critical servers had crashed, and they were working feverishly to get it back up. (smile) My prayer was answered, and I had enough time to learn what I needed.

Now, I'm not saying my prayer caused the server to go down. Who knows the way God works. If not the server, maybe an urgent conference call with the boss, or maybe an unforeseen schedule conflict, or maybe ... nothing at all. If it all came to a head and I fell flat on my face, I was ready for that too. We just don't know, and that's part of trusting God. I was listening as best I could in that moment, but my will to control the situation was stressing me out. Trusting in God's will, however, allowed me to relax in the present, and allowed for both our wills to come together.

This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes, and it's from St. Ignatius. He says: "Act as if everything depended on you; trust as if everything depended on God." When we are acting out our highest will, and trusting that God is guiding the outcome, there's a sense of peace that we can feel. When we find ourselves in circumstances where nothing is clear, and the answer seems no where in sight, be present with that and let go of any fear.

Sometimes when we find ourselves frustrated in our understanding or feelings of a situation, perhaps we're trying too hard. Here is a quote from a book by James Finley that expresses this beautifully. He writes:

"How does an apple ripen? (pause) It just sits in the sun." A small green apple cannot ripen in the night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large, red, ripe, and juicy besides its small green counterparts. ... The birth of the true self takes place in God's time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in his hidden action within us."

This ripening of an apple is a wonderful metaphor for letting go and trusting God when we feel we aren't getting clarity in our lives, even when we're doing our best to listen. It requires patience and trust.

Some of us recently heard a clear idea of this in the sermon from Dr. Wilson Van Dusen, who is a psychologist, a Swedenborgian scholar, and a mystic. He shared that sometimes after asking a deep spiritual question of the divine, he would not get an answer for several days or longer. He explained that during that time he knew he was being realigned internally by the Lord, that he was not able to receive an answer given his understanding at the time. He now knows to trust this process, that he can wait patiently and sensitively; the answer will eventually come. Maybe while *we* are waiting patiently for months, or even years, God might be realigning us.

Also, there may be times when we think we are not discerning our highest will. Or, we may not be happy with the fruits of the actions that we might initially have thought were best for us. In these cases, we must honestly ask ourselves what were we expecting. We all have limits to our patience. But again and again, God will ask us to let go of our fears and our expectations.

Whenever you feel impatient, take time to relax, to listen, and to discern your highest intention. And when you eventually recognize the voice of the Lord behind the knocking door, call out in your heart like Samuel, saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Amen