

## **Listening Fully**

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

September 5, 2021

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the rector of a seminary in the late 1930s. As rector, he was in charge of preparing future ministers of the Gospel. While preaching was certainly a large part of their training, especially as Protestant ministers, he also reminded them of another important ministry they had to learn: the ministry of listening. In fact, he believed that listening is the first thing we owe others, even before the ministry of proclaiming the Word. “We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God,” (*Life Together*, 99) he told the seminarians.

As Christians, we aren't always good listeners. We would rather give answers or offer advice. Even when we do listen, we don't always listen fully. As Bonhoeffer cautions, “there is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening.” (98) Whenever we listen ‘with half an ear,’ as he calls it, we usually fall into what's called, ‘confirmation bias.’ Confirmation bias is where we listen only to the things that confirm what we already believe, thus reinforcing our beliefs and making us feel like we've consulted others. To overcome this bias, we need to listen to the whole message that someone is sharing with us and be able to listen to diverse viewpoints. We do not have to agree with everything we hear, but we do have to take it all in. A good listener doesn't let confirmation bias give them selective hearing.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a sign of what he wants to do for his followers. In it, he healed a deaf man by opening his ears fully. Jesus opened them so fully that the man no longer had a speech impediment when he spoke. Jesus wants to open our ears, minds, and hearts so fully not just so we can hear sounds, but so that we can truly listen to others and to God. We know that the Holy Spirit speaks to us in many different ways and we don't want to miss any of them. "Ephphatha!"—that is, "Be opened!"

Beyond not being a good listener, sometimes, we purposely chose not to listen because we are afraid of what we will hear. We would rather not be disturbed by one more problem or another person's opinion. In response, perhaps God is saying to us, "be strong, fear not," just as God said through the prophet Isaiah. We should never be afraid of listening. Whenever we listen fully, our understanding is never diminished, but expanded or further clarified.

*The followers of Jesus are those striving to listen fully.*

Do I pray for God to make me a better listener? Do I have a high degree of confirmation bias in my life?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray for the Lord Jesus to open our ears so that we may be able to hear each other in new ways. We listen fully to others ultimately because God has listened fully to us, for in the words of Bonhoeffer, "it is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear." (97)