

Hearing Aids

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Many of us have suffered through the progressive and oft humiliating deterioration of our ability to process the auditory contents of our respective environs. We don't hear so good. Most of us have at least been on the other side of such auditory equations. It seems to me as an admitted other-side resident and lay observer that there are reliable, Kubler Ross like stages in this unwelcome progression.

Early on it seems that its the speaker's fault. "Stop mumbling!" Gradually "what" and "hunh" come to rival "and" and "the" in the vocabulary of the audio-compromised. Communicating becomes more challenging. Decisions begin to be made, is it really worth explaining this thing...again? Is this the sort of thing that sounds right, yelled? Should even I bother. Partners tacitly acknowledge an increase in shared stillness. Which is kind of wonderful, except when its not.

Once the veil of denial has been rent, the struggle can be shared with family and friends more openly. Sometimes even light-heartedly, particularly when the functioning of one ear deteriorates more rapidly than the other. My siblings and I are sure to stand on mom's left when we fear her disapproval, and on the right when we want something.

Awkward situations arise with more frequency. Partners begin to make excuses. I'm sorry he can't hear you... Its not that she doesn't care, she just (point to ear). Eventually certain social environments are avoided altogether.

And so for many, the decision looms. is it time for a hearing aid?

Often Jesus used every day realities to teach his followers about the Kingdom of God. While the road of audiophonic degeneration we have just traveled is most certainly a modern one, the progression of increasing spiritual impairment is not. Sometimes, we don't hear so good.

We know, on some level, that my two coats to your none is a problem. That faith without works is dead. We know. We readily point out the failure of others to live in ways that match what they profess. And yet. And even so, somehow seeing people hungry and homeless becomes more and more acceptable to us. It also happens in stages, I think, as our ability to hear God and speak truth become incrementally compromised.

Each day the moral corners we cut are slightly more substantial. Subtly, over time, we join our colleagues in the shameless cloaking of greed in the guises of competition, advancement or these days, solvency. In time we become convinced that we are in fact as poor and needy as anyone.

This reinforces our conviction that our primary and exclusive obligation is to take care of our families and our selves. Our picture of what that care looks like seems to always require just a bit more than we already have. as our self concern breeds jealousy, and sometimes even contempt. But surely God would like us to be successful, no? Convinced of our immanent fiscal demise, we cling to our resources like orphans with crumbs of bread, trusting few and fearing much.

Bit by bit, the voice of truth, of who God is and whose we are, the still small voice of the spirit becomes inaudible, as we build fortresses around the thrones of our lives, upon which we sit, in silence.

Last week I was talking with a parishioner about his progressive hearing loss. And I share this with permission. He relayed his journey of aural deterioration and his eventual resignation to his need for a hearing aid.

Having made his decision, he went to see the audiologist, who unexpectedly referred him to an ear nose and throat specialist. Three hours into that appointment he could suddenly hear the whirr of the overhead fan and the buzzing of the obnoxious florescent lights. He had been healed, not by the installation of any sort of device, but rather by the arduous removal of layers and layers and layers of accumulated ear wax.

The difference, we might readily note, between this gentleman and one suffering from degenerative hearing loss, is the hearer's degree of control over the problem. To the latter, we offer our compassion and empathy, to the former our two cents--Clean out your ears!

I think that sometimes we speak and act as if our moral and spiritual deterioration is as inevitable as the inner ear changes that often accompany advancing age. We wink at one another when in the presence of the whipper snapper who things he can change the world, or anything. As if becoming more and more saturated in a God-free culture is simply what happens to human beings, over time.

Our tradition and scriptures tell us otherwise. We have been initiated into a communal life that is grounded in a value system that is entirely other. Maintaining and growing into that alternate reality requires discipline. The discipline of worship, study, prayer, giving and service..the daily

work of loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

These are not things we do in order to win God's favor or comfort, his love is ours and has been in its fulness since creation. No, we do these things in order to get the wax out. Living counter-culturally as we do, we need to repeatedly come together, before God to be renewed, reminded and restored.

But a word of caution, if I might, to those of us who have become aware of our own role in our increasingly listless spiritual lives. Our temptation as residents of this driven culture, will be to get a pick and start digging ourselves, determined to excise the gunk of our lives, which accumulated by our own inattention. In so digging, we will inadvertently continue as the Lords of our own salvation. Clean ears? This we can accomplish. I can do that!

And thus we come full circle back to our Gospel story. Jesus put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." Jesus performed the miracle of healing. And the man's ears were opened, and his tongue released, and he spoke plainly.

Surely it is God who saves us. It is Christ who can restore our hearing and our living by his infinite mercy and compassion. In the end, like our gospel mute, my friend was so excited to be able to hear again that he didn't even stop to be embarrassed by his own role in his debilitation. In fact he will probably tell you the story himself at coffee hour, such is his delight at being able to hear again.

May it be so in our hearts, and in our living. Come Holy Spirit, may we hear you calling again, and may it be a sweet, sweet sound in our ears.