

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time “Synodality and the Art of Listening”

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This may come as a surprise for a number of you. However, I have a confession to make. As a child, I was never a really good athlete. There, I said it. I suspect many of you are looking at me now, scratching your head, asking the question, “How can this be?” It is true though. My parents tried everything to get me involved with sports. The best they were able to do is to get me to play baseball. Of all the sports, I liked baseball the most because instead of running manically around a field chasing after a ball until your heart explodes like you do with soccer, baseball is more about standing around motionless waiting for the ball to eventually come to you. That was far more civilized in my estimation. However, I wasn’t really a good baseball player either. I remember a year when I was really young that I was assigned to play left field. The reason for that is because nothing much happened out there. I loved it though because it was quiet and I could watch the clouds pass by. Being athletic was fun! The trouble is, I liked to daydream and one game it got me into real trouble. All I remember from that game was hearing a distant cry, “Frank, watch out!” That is when I looked up just in time to see a baseball hit me square in the forehead. I lost consciousness for a moment, not to mention a fair amount of pride. I woke up seconds later to sound of the other kids laughing at me. However, I learned a valuable lesson that day. When you are playing a sport, you need to pay attention to what is happening around you and you need to listen to your teammates and coach, especially when the ball is heading your way. As we make our spiritual pilgrimages through life, I think we can all agree that the art of listening to God and the other people in our lives is also very important.

We can see this message in the scriptures this weekend. Our first reading is from Deuteronomy chapter 6 and it has a very important passage for the Jewish people. This passage is so important to the Jewish people that they nail it to their doors. This is what Moses has to say, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” The importance of this passage is also underscored in the Gospel reading we have from Saint Mark. Our Gospel reading today begins, “One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, ‘Which is the first of all the commandments?’ Jesus replied, ‘The first is this: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

And so, there you have it. Jesus summarized 613 commandments in the Torah with two commandments, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, love God and love neighbor. This weekend, I want to focus on what does it mean to listen to God’s word. You see, the passage of note from Deuteronomy begins, “Hear, O Israel”. In Hebrew, the word is “*Shema*”. It is a word that means emphatically, “to listen”. The Latin for the word “listen” is “*Oboedire*”, it is where we get the word obedience. It is a word that also means emphatically, “to listen”. And this is really not easy to do in our culture because there are so many things competing for our attention.

In our culture, it can become all too easy to place our relationship with God on equal footing with the other concerns in our life. When we need God, we spend time with God. When

we don't need God, we shelve God. We treat God like an application on our smart phones, to open and shut at will. This cannot be further from the mindset of both Moses and Jesus. For biblically minded people, it is *shema* O Israel, *oboedire* people of God, the Lord your God is Lord alone. This is to say, God is not to be one concern among other concerns. Rather, God should be our ultimate concern. God isn't to be treated like one application among many on our spiritual smartphone called the soul. God is to be understood as the operating system itself by which the applications draw their existence and meaning from. Do you follow me?

Listening. It is something we are not always good at. Whether it is in the halls of Congress or around the dinner table, we are very good at letting other people know what we think. However, how often are we slow to truly listen to what is going on in the hearts and minds of others? This is why I am very suspicious of social media by the way. How often is social media simply about telling people what they think without being respectful of others. People can be so rude and often times cruel with others on social media in a way they never would dream of if they were conversing in person. Similarly, when it comes to our prayer life, I think it is fair to say that we are very good at letting God know what is on our mind and heart. However, how often do we forget to simply quiet our minds so to listen in our hearts for God's response?

As you heard last weekend, Pope Francis has called for a global synod. It will be a two-year process and the focus for this this synod is the theme of synodality. I have been asked quite a bit about what synodality is. At the heart of synodality is the challenge to listen to each other, to pray with each other, to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit with each other, and to journey together to where that voice leads us. The Holy Father wants us to begin this synodal journey at the parish level. In the coming weeks and months, we will learn more about what that will look like here at St. Vincent de Paul and in our Archdiocese. However, at the heart of this process is for Church leadership to listen to you. This is very good, in my humble opinion, and my prayer is that this process of listening will bear good fruit. To get us in the spirit of synodality, Pope Francis recently shared his thoughts about it. Here is an excerpt. He writes,

“Dear brothers and sisters, may this Synod be a true season of the Spirit! For we need the Spirit, the ever new breath of God, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy. The Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us. Father Congar, of blessed memory, once said: ‘There is no need to create *another Church*, but to create a *different Church*’ (*True and False Reform in the Church*). That is the challenge. For a ‘different Church’, a Church open to the newness that God wants to suggest, let us with greater fervour and frequency invoke the Holy Spirit and humbly listen to him, journeying together as he, the source of communion and mission, desires: with docility and courage.”

My friends, the reason why I was hit on the head with a baseball when I was a kid, apart from not paying attention, is because I didn't listen to my teammates when the ball was hit in my direction. We can ask ourselves this week, how good am I at listening to what God has to say to me through scripture and in my prayer life? How good am I at truly listening to others when they speak from their heart to me? What is one way I can improve on the art of listening to others this coming week? The Gospel this weekend challenges us in part that, if we truly want to grow in our capacity to love God and love our neighbor, the journey begins with listening.