

Listening with Awareness
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When Pharaoh's daughter saw the ark among the reeds, she sent her maid to get it. And when Pharaoh's daughter had opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby wept. So she had compassion on him. Exodus 3:5-6

A mighty river like the Nile would likely have all sorts of things washed down its length and lodge in the reeds along its bank. One could picture that an important person such as Pharaoh's daughter might ignore such items. In this story she did not. Something about the ark sealed with tar resting among the reeds caught her eye. She had it retrieved and found a crying baby within. And although she had no relationship with the baby or his family she had compassion on him even though she recognized that this was a Hebrew baby boy, viewed as a danger and threat by Pharaoh. Pharaoh's daughter saw with awareness and listened with awareness and it made all the difference to Moses and eventually to all the Israelites who were led by Moses out of their slavery in Egypt.

This week we begin a new series of sermons with the option of small group discussions. The series is on the subject of listening. Listening is one reflection of our fundamental response to life as illustrated in the following quotation: "We can tell what kind of freedom we are in by what we like to think and talk about, listen to, see, and do, since all our enjoyment comes from what we love" (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 147). What we think about or daydream of, what our topics of conversation tend to be about, what we focus our listening on or ignore, and what we focus the attention of our sight on or what seems like irrelevant experience are all related to what we fundamentally care about.

For example, people whose underlying concern is supporting their sense of self-worth will be constantly attending to anything that magnifies their sense of self-importance and if anything occurs that threatens this they will respond defensively or with complaints. Listening to other people talk about their lives tends to be relatively boring or insignificant. Such people will ever be ready to laud their own accomplishments and point out their superior qualities. They will ever be ready to minimize others accomplishments and dismiss anything that might be to another's credit. Such people tend to have rather one-sided conversations or if the conversation is beyond their control they are listless and bored.

Very different are people who have received something of the Lord's love and wisdom. They care about other people and pay attention to them, listening to their thoughts, reflections and needs with an ear to hear whether there is some way in which they can be of help. This is reflected in a passage from the teachings for the New Church explaining a prayer that God would deal mercifully with an important quest. It states:

"And deal mercifully" means an influx of love. This is clear from the consideration that the essence of mercy is love. Love itself is converted into mercy and becomes mercy when anyone in need of help is regarded with love or charity. Consequently mercy is the expression of love towards those who are needy and wretched. But here in the internal

sense 'mercy' is used to mean love and 'dealing mercifully' an influx of love. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3063)

Pharaoh's daughter reaction to seeing and hearing a crying baby reflects this inflowing of love from the Lord. Many of us know that a crying baby doesn't always evoke this response. For some people an airline flight can be almost entirely defined in a negative way by a crying infant, even if it is of relatively short duration. Admittedly, few of us like to listen to an infant wailing for extended period of time when there is nothing for us to do and there is no chance for us to move away. It isn't hard for thoughts to come to mind about the relative incompetence of the parent associated with the infant. But many of us with experience with infants know that at times they will be crying and there is little to do about it, but reflect that sometimes life is hard for that baby. If we have eyes and ears to recognize it there are times when life is hard for many children, teens, young adults and beyond. The response of people going through hard times sometimes leaves them just as the passage quoted states: they are needy and wretched.

The key passage describing the internal sense of Pharaoh's daughter's response in the *Arcana Caelestia* speaks of the reaction that the Lord would like to be able to evoke in us to people going through hard times. We read: ". . . when people who are perceptive have feelings of compassion they know that they are being alerted by the Lord to offer help" (*Arcana Caelestia* 6737).

To have feelings of compassion you have to listen with awareness to other people. Recognizing their state of mind takes paying attention. All sorts of things can get in the way of giving this kind of attention. A psychology experiment asked seminary students to fill out a questionnaire about their religious convictions and then go to another building to talk about the parable of the Good Samaritan and how he helped someone in need while others passed by. For some of the seminary students they were told to hurry to the next building or they would be late. On the way the students passed a man in an alleyway sitting slumped over and who moaned and coughed as they walked by. Very few of those who were told they were already late stopped to help, even if they were about to talk about the importance of stopping and helping as reflected by the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Hurrying is not the only thing that gets in the way of us paying attention. You have probably noticed sometimes humorous references to people who are staring at information on their smart phones or are extensively texting another person even when they have someone else in front of them to whom they are giving little attention. Sometimes children who want the attention of their distracted parent so much that they will act in ways that gets negative attention from the parent. Apparently even negative attention is better than no attention. In contrast, we also know what it is like to have someone give us their full attention, listening perceptively to what we are saying and responding in ways for which we can feel grateful.

We are allowed to have some limits on what we will listen to or how long we will listen. Have you ever had an older child or a young teen want to tell you in tremendous detail about a computer game they are excited about? Other people can talk on and on about what seems to you to be relatively inconsequential perspectives, ideas or experiences. It takes patience and tact to intervene in these extended conversations to put limits on them and not dismiss something that is important to another. Listening with Patience is the topic of next week's sermon.

One of the times it can be especially hard to hear another person is when you strongly disagree with that person's ideas or values. And sometimes it is a spouse or family member to whom we have a hard time listening. Listening with Humility is the third topic in this series.

Listening with awareness is important in our relationships with other people. It is also important as we turn to the Lord to learn what He has to teach us. In the Exodus stories Moses is a symbol of true ideas that the Lord would like to bring to our attention. Prayer and reading and reflecting on the Lord's Word are means that He can use to bring true ideas to our attention. But prayer can be an entirely one-sided conversation in which we are caught up with our own needs, wants and preconceptions. Reading and thinking about the Word can be merely a search for ideas that confirm what we want to believe and that supports a life that serves us more than others.

To really listen to the Lord requires several interconnected efforts as presented in this passage from *True Christian Religion*.

There are three things that form faith in us: first, turning to the Lord; second, learning truths from the Word; and third, living by those truths. Now, because there are three parts to the formation of faith and each one is not the same as the others, it follows that they are separable. People could turn to the Lord and not know any truths about God and the Lord except things they had been told in the past. People could also know a great many truths from the Word and still not live by them. People for whom these three things are separated, meaning that they have one but not another, do not have a faith that will save them. A faith begins to have saving power when these elements are connected. The quality of the faith depends on what kind of connection the three have. (*True Christian Religion* 348)

Without these three things in our lives, approaching the Lord, learning from the Word and living by the true ideas we have recognized we also will not be able to truly listen to others. Our natural heredity will keep us focused on ourselves, our own needs, want, and perspectives. That heredity will tend to drown out what others might tell us. Picture being in a conversation with a man who is mostly paying attention to himself as if in a mirror he is holding up and barely glancing at you. You would sense that he is more concerned with how he sees himself from self-consciousness, insecurity or vanity than much of what you might try to communicate to him.

In the parable of the Sheep and Goats in the Gospel of Matthew the Lord teaches:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' (Matthew 25:34-36)

When asked when they had done these things for the Lord He responded: "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40). The teachings for the New Church show us how each of the states of need in this parable reflect opportunities we can have to help others in their spiritual lives, inspiring them to live

better, helping them see what is true, and tending to many other needs that we as human beings can experience in our lives. We will never recognize these opportunities to serve others and so serve the Lord if we do not learn to listen with attention through receiving ever more of the Lord's love and wisdom as we try to lead wisely kind lives. Listening with Compassion will be the final topic of this series.

What would help you listen better to the Lord and listen better to the people in your lives? What priorities or patterns of thought in your life would benefit from quieting so that you can hear better? Each of our lives is on a spiritual journey that the Lord would like to lead us on so that we become ever more useful, attentive and happy people May we follow His leading. AMEN.

Lessons: Exodus 1:22, 2:1-10, *Arcana Caelestia* 6732-6737 portions

Exodus 1:22, 2:1-10

So Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive."

¹ And a man of the house of Levi went and took *as wife* a daughter of Levi. ² So the woman conceived and bore a son. And when she saw that he *was* a beautiful *child*, she hid him three months. ³ But when she could no longer hide him, she took an ark of bulrushes for him, daubed it with asphalt and pitch, put the child in it, and laid *it* in the reeds by the river's bank. ⁴ And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him.

⁵ Then the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river. And her maidens walked along the riverside; and when she saw the ark among the reeds, she sent her maid to get it. ⁶ And when she had opened *it*, she saw the child, and behold, the baby wept. So she had compassion on him, and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?" ⁸ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the maiden went and called the child's mother. ⁹ Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give *you* your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. ¹⁰ And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. So she called his name Moses, saying, "Because I drew him out of the water."

Arcana Caelestia 6732-6737 portions

"And [Pharaoh's daughter] saw the box in the middle of the weed" means a discernment of the crude form of truth among false factual knowledge.

"And she took it" means an eagerness to know.

"And she opened it, and saw him, the child" means an investigation to find out what it was like, and the discernment that it was truth coming from the Lord.

"And behold, the boy was crying" means sadness.

"And she took pity on him" means being alerted by the Lord. This is clear from the meaning of "taking pity" as an influx of charity from the Lord, for when anyone looks with charity on someone in distress, as Pharaoh's daughter does here on the child crying in the box made of rush, a feeling of compassion is aroused. And since the feeling is stirred by the Lord, it is an alerting by Him. Indeed when people who are perceptive have feelings of compassion they know that they are being alerted by the Lord to offer help.