

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time “Listening to Jesus”

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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 I was assigned to play left field specifically 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, as I woke up seconds later to sound of the other kids laughing. But 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 team mates and coach, especially when the ball is heading your way. And as we make our spiritual pilgrimages through life, I think we can all agree that the art of paying attention to what is happening around us and the art of listening to the Lord is also very important.

And we can see this message in the scriptures this weekend. Our first reading is from Deuteronomy chapter 6 and it is 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. If you count up the number of laws in the Torah, the number scholars come up with is 613. Jesus summarizes the Law 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 here. 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 farther from the mindset of both Moses and Jesus. For them, 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?

You see, the reason why I was not a very good baseball player as a kid is because I didn't put my heart, soul, mind, and strength into the game as much as other kids. And growing up, I discovered what we all discover in time: if I want to be good at something, I need to put my heart, soul, mind and strength into it. If I want to be best at something, that means I need to put my heart, soul, mind and strength into it more than anyone else. We all know that someone does not become a professional pianist, baseball player or dancer by only practicing an hour each week. Professionals at anything are professional because they put their heart, soul, mind and strength in it more so than others. What this also means is: If I am falling behind at work, school, family or friendships compared to others, there is a good chance that this is because I need to put more heart, soul, mind and strength into these values. And because we are not robots, we have to make priorities about what we are going to be putting our hearts, souls, minds and strengths into. And so, when work or career becomes more important than family...this can turn into a real problem, can't it? When our personal wants and desires become more important than a relationship with God or the needs of others, we are eventually setting ourselves up for sincere disappointment in life. No one develops a healthy relationship with God spending only an hour a week at it or a couple minutes each day. Our identity as a disciple of Jesus needs to be at the heart of who we are every minute of every day.

The scribe approaches Jesus wanting to know the one thing he needed to focus on to achieve eternal happiness. And Jesus gives him an answer, “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”. Jesus saw that the scribe listened with understanding and tells him that he is not far from the Kingdom of God. It is a haunting question the Gospel seems to give us this weekend, how far are we from the Kingdom of God? Do we treat God like an application on a phone or is God our operating system for which all our “applications” find their meaning? What would it look like this week if we sincerely put all our hearts, souls, minds and strengths into loving God and the people around us? If we all did this, ask yourself, what would our world look like then?