

LISTENING -101

A message of God's Grace. JAMES 1: 2; 19-20; 22-24

Many of you know that I am a recovering alcoholic. Within the Alcoholics Anonymous family we often share the expression; "In any situation; if your head, your heart and your gut don't agree, there is something wrong".

Too bad, I didn't listen.

Recently someone asked me about where I disappeared to last fall. They were referring to my absence and inactivity here at the Celebrate Life services. It was a casual question, but a good one. I began to reflect about how challenged my spirituality had been. In order to explain what happened, I need to go back quite a bit further in time, to the time that I retired from working in the prison.

Heather and I had been discussing my retirement for quite some time prior to the actual decision. She had been watching me sliding deeper into depression which was manifesting itself in bouts of withdrawal and anger. We both knew that my occupation was the key element in this process. I was tired, emotionally drained and tenuously clinging to my spirituality. I knew in my heart that it was time to go. At one point I said to Heather, this job is killing me.

But I didn't listen to my own words.

The decision was made; I would retire in July 2008. I was required to take a medical examination for pension purposes. It was a fateful appointment that I had with my doctor. At that time, I was living in a euphoric state, generated in large part to my pending retirement, but also due to the plan to attend Queen's Theological College. My doctor and I discussed discontinuing my medication for depression. Based on what he saw and heard at that time he made it my call. When discussing it with Heather and with the past moods fresh in her mind, she questioned the wisdom of ceasing. I had also a sense of unease, a negative gut instinct to stopping the medication.

But I did not listen.

I applied to QTC, and contrary to what I had been told on my visit to the college, I was advised that I would need to take some 5 BA credit courses before I could enrol. I found that I could only take two credits per year as a part time student, which would take two years and a half years. I was now looking at almost 7 years in school before I would graduate. As well there would be a requirement for internship. At 60 years old, it seemed an almost impossible task. I became discouraged and expressed my disappointment and frustration to Heather.

And still I did not hear.

After retiring and just prior to Christmas of that year, two events had significant impact on my life. First, Heather became gravely ill, and after ten days of thumping and bumping by a host of Doctors, she was diagnosed with Meningitis. My world seemed to collapse, and in the darkness on my mind, I feared she would die. To this day, I cannot reflect on this without becoming overwhelmed with emotions. My friends told me to hang on to hope, and pray.

And I did not hear them.

Second, and just two days after she got home from the hospital, while I was helping a friend store his motorcycle, I ruptured a disc in my back. I wound up in hospital for four days. Lying on my back in hospital and at home, or sitting in an easy chair at home and pretty much out of it on medication, I began to dwell on my own mortality. Catching myself in this negative thinking I scolded myself not to be so morbid, that it was depressing.

And yet again, I heard nothing.

The next spring I was called by my former supervisor at the prison. He asked me to return for a period of two to three months, as he was desperately short staffed, and what staff he did have had little experience in the job. I agreed to return, but only after overriding the alarm bell going off in my head.

And still I heard nothing.

Immediately upon entering the work site, I knew I had made a mistake. The pall of negativity fell on me like a ton of bricks. I wanted to run. Having committed myself to help, and priding myself on being "a man of my word", I stuck it out, ignoring the oppression weighting me down.

And yet I would not listen to my instincts.

Heather became alarmed by my moodiness, and repeatedly asked me if I was OK. I felt annoyed by the question, but only replied that I was FINE. Incidentally the word fine is an acronym which means Fouled up, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional.

I did not hear her plea.

I became more and more emotionally unavailable to her and everyone else. I started to resent anyone asking me to do anything, even if it was to assist with service here.

And I did not hear myself rejecting God's call to serve. As I reflect on this, I weep.

By October Heather finally had enough. Based on my frequent and extended silences and my refusal to be engaged as a partner she became convinced that I had ceased to love her. She did the only thing she could and made plans to move out. I became aware of her plans, and decided she in turn no longer loved me. I was devastated; I collapsed emotionally and could experience nothing but pain, bewilderment and anger.

I found myself at an AA meeting and I asked for a desire chip, stating that I had not relapsed, but had "lost my way".

And I did not hear my own voice.

The week before Heather moved out, I came to Celebrate Life. A bright young man, Alex was speaking. He is an accomplished speaker, and I always look forward to his messages. He spoke of his struggle with depression.

And I finally listened.

I clearly understood that I was in a deep and dangerous state of depression. I give thanks to God for Alex. His honesty may well have saved my life. The next day I called my Doctor. Based on what he saw and heard, I was immediately put back on my anti-depression medication. I also reactivated counselling with TCAS. I called Heather (she was away on business) and talked to her in a way and in such depth that I hardly recognized myself. It had been so long since I had been in touch with reality, so long since we had truly talked, so long since I had been able to see the truth.

None the less she moved out. I came to understand that this was not because she hated me. Vainly at first, I thought this was the first time someone had loved me enough to leave me. I grew to understand she had left because she loved herself. She too had been lost in the morass of my illness.

I had expected her to call, but she didn't. As the days went by I became more and more frantic in my thinking and behaviour. When I knew she was back from her business travel I attempted to call her. I tried numerous times in the late afternoon and early evening. I made one last call, promising myself it would be the last effort, and prayed to God that she would answer. She did. She cautiously agreed to meet me to talk.

In the course of our first face to face conversation, and replying to my question about our future, she said "there's hope". I grasped this like a drowning man would seize onto a thrown life preserver. And the words of Jesus came to me...faith, hope and love. But I also heard her say that things had to change, and I heard myself agreeing.

And I began to listen with an intensity that I previously thought beyond me. I listened to her, all of her, the words, the inflections, her body language and her facial expressions. We spent many long days and evenings talking, and as I listened and opened my heart our relationship not only healed, but gained strength.

At one point, I heard her say she wanted a home, not just to be a tenant in my house. It was obvious that she would never return to the house we had shared. I heard my heart tell me that no piece of property was worth losing our relationship over. The solution was obvious. Get rid of "the" house, and with Heather find another, and together we would create a home. And together we have.

I listened to others at AA meetings and kept my piece. I listened to the messages at Sunday services, and began to hear that I was not alone. Perhaps others' problems were much different, but the healing came from only one source... GOD.

And I know now that all these people, places and things which guided me to overcome the adversity of my own thinking, were placed in my path by a loving God. In overcoming adversity, I could truly understand what it is to love and be loved by our God. And I've listened to God. He has gently and patiently guided me back to my faith and my spirituality.

There is great wisdom in the expression; God gave us two ears and only one mouth. Therefore we should listen twice as long as we speak. My intuition tells me that this is a worthy mantra to apply to my life.

Life is good today. The prospects of a "tomorrow" look promising.

I pray that I will never forget the lessons of yesterday. I pray that God will grant courage to those who love me so that they may speak to me about unheeded alarm bells. I pray that I will continue listen.

Praise be to God, Amen.