



ATTENTIVE LISTENING: HEARING GOD AND ONE ANOTHER

Diana Curren Bennett

Published in SmallGroups.com, October 2011

What comes to mind when you hear the words "spiritual disciplines"? For many, the concept is another "to do" list. The unfortunate part becomes the dismissal of the practice purely based on lack of time or energy to do something else. Spiritual disciplines, in reality, stem from our being transformed back into human "beings" from our current focus of human "doers." The spiritual disciplines then become a way of life: a rhythm that keeps us noticing and practicing the presence of God.

While there is a myriad of disciplines in which to be engaged, there is one that is not commonly sought yet is essential in the life of a small group; both individually and corporately. Attentive listening is a learned discipline for hearing one another and for hearing God, for if we do not listen attentively to one another, how can we attentively listen to God?

Attentive Listening to One Another

Not many people are good listeners! We casually ask someone how he or she is and don't listen to his or her response. If we are sort of listening, we most likely are thinking how we can top their story and often respond, "you think you have it bad!" Or if someone is commenting in a small group about an issue or question before the group, the tendency is to interrupt, correct, or quickly present another point of view. Basically we have not learned how to be present with one another and with God; how to attentively hear what someone else is saying or noticing what God is doing or

where God might be leading a friend in their spiritual journey.

Attentive and prayerful listening, involves the Holy Spirit and is often counter-cultural to our practices. It is contemplative listening. Careful, sensitive, evocative listening. This kind of listening tunes into the other person at the deepest possible level, listening not just to words and ideas, but to nuances, shades of expressions, to feelings as well as non-verbal cues. Active listening requires full attention to the speaker as it demonstrates acceptance and is a basic way of showing love. Eye contact is essential because it sends a strong message of being present with the person and an interest in hearing the words, ideas, or concerns the group member may have. Body language represents thousands of words! We can easily discourage someone's sharing by showing we just do not want to listen primarily by our posture.

Attentive listening can be developed more effectively by using the covenant the group has designed. If part of your group's purpose is to build trust, share deeply, refrain from giving advice, and encourage one another, the need to listen becomes a tool that allows the trust level to rise. It is important that the art of listening be addressed. The process begins with the leader who must understand and model the skill of listening.

When you listen to one another, the person speaking has the floor. No one should interrupt. The listeners

know they will have their chance. Being mindful of how to prayerfully listen involves asking these questions:

- What is the person actually saying?
- What are my emotions as I hear these words?
- What does the Holy Spirit want me to hear in this sharing?
- Where do I see God moving in this person's story?
- What question might I ask (at the right time) to clarify what I hear?
- How can I affirm this spiritual friend of mine? (no advice!)

When people feel they have been carefully and attentively heard, the bonding in the group becomes strong. Achieving this level of listening requires reminders and wise guidance from the small group leader.

Attentive Listening to God

What does the voice of God sound like? Matthew 17:5 tells us that we are to listen to Jesus. We must, therefore, hear God in some capacity even today. God speaks to us primarily through His Word. He speaks also through other people, circumstances, writings, music, art, and nature. We also seem to have the capacity to hear God's voice deep within our souls. It therefore is foundational to our spiritual journey that we recognize God's voice and learn to discern His voice from other voices that bombard our minds with temptations and bad options.

I am a "has been" musician! When my children were young, I always managed to be one of the chaperones for taking a class into Boston to hear the Symphony Orchestra. As usual for a student concert, the director would demonstrate one instrument, for instance an oboe, to introduce the particular sound; the learned and perfected sound. They were then asked to raise their hands when they heard the oboe

during a short moment when all the different instruments were playing. The anticipation of recognizing the oboe during the concert was electrifying!

So it is with God's voice. If we do not read Scripture, learn what God is saying and inviting us into, we will not recognize His voice in the difficult times; the desolation days of discouragement. We will not recognize God's voice in the demanding culture of relativity when one becomes confused with truthful responses. The discipline of daily Scripture reading and reflection becomes essential to our spiritual growth if we want to know God's voice and therefore His will. Other voices will try to drown out our Christian convictions. We need to recognize God's voice in order to "listen to the right voice."

Listening to God is at the heart of the gospel message. We read in Mark 9:7 "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him!" John tells us that those who belong to Jesus listen to him and know his voice (John 10:14). In 1 Kings 19:12 we read about Elijah not hearing God in the thunder and earthquakes, but in a "gentle whisper" or "still small voice." Attentiveness. Open-handed receptivity; a yearning to hear God. He will speak. Are we preparing our group members to hear? How often do we ask effective questions such as "what is the invitation in this particular Scripture"? Or perhaps "in what way is your life changing because you recognized and responded to God's voice"?

The discipline of attentive listening to God and listening to one another develops over time. It becomes a way of life! It develops a new and powerful experience of hearing God as individuals and as a small group corporately. Attentive listening helps us become more aware of God's presence and faithfulness; it motivates individuals and groups to be more open and receptive to God's transformational love. For the small group, attentive listening creates a

healthy caring environment for strengthening,
knowing, loving, and experiencing spiritual life to-
gether.