

Daddy! I need to tell you something

By David Gibson
NC News Service

The child of about 2 and one-half entered the living room at a fast clip, stopping abruptly in front of the chair where her father was sitting. "Daddy!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I have to tell you something. It's important."

Then the words of her story began to tumble out — something about the current plight of her doll named Mary, whose apron, it seemed, had accidentally gotten all wet in the bathroom sink.

Each of the child's sentences was followed by a considerable pause as she searched for just the right words with which to continue her account. Some of her sentences erupted in a fairly disordered way, almost as though they were being translated from another language.

But one thing was perfectly clear. The child wanted her father's undivided attention. In the universe of little children, her message was ranked "urgent."

That little girl's feelings, however, are not uncommon in the universe of adults. Most members of the human race experience moments when they have something they urgently want to express — something they want another person to take time to understand.

And most members of the human family probably know from experience how frustrating it is at such a moment if another person doesn't listen attentively and, in the end, doesn't really understand.

The human desire to be heard — in fact, the cry to be heard — is woven into the fabric of the Psalms. "When I call, answer me, O my just God," the psalmist



pleads. Again the psalmist calls out: "Hearken to my words, O Lord, attend to my sighing." Yet again: "Hear, O Lord, a just suit; attend to my outcry."

But if the desire to be heard is human, it also is divine. God too has a word to say — a word central to what God is. John's Gospel tells us that word was always with God. "The word was God," says John.

There is, I believe, a human story with divine underpinnings in each person. It longs to be heard. But here is what is perplexing: Listening can be difficult. And in the everyday world, life's rapid pace can mitigate against the kind of listening that really "hears" another person.

In her best-selling book, "One

Writer's Beginnings," Eudora Welty talks about listening. "Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories," the writer explains. "Listening 'for' them is something more acute than listening to them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on."

"Listening children" know there are stories to be heard in the scenes around them, Miss Welty continues. "When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for (a story) to come out, like a mouse from its hole."

Her early instinct put her on the right track for a storyteller, says Miss Welty. She realized that the scenes around her were "full of hints, pointers, suggestions and promises of things to find out and

know about human beings."

Listening, though difficult, is like a key to human life's fuller dimensions. There are so many indications that to thrive — to develop well — people at times need others who take care to understand them.

In fact, making the effort to understand others — to hear their meaning, not just their words — is a beginning point in life from which many good things can stem.

I think it can reflect an attitude of respect for the great dignity of human life — a life whose divine underpinnings then come into closer view.

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

"Let him who has ears to hear me, hear!" That is what Jesus cried out when he finished the parable of the sower (Mark 4:9).

And in the New Testament book of Revelation, each of the letters to the seven churches ends with this refrain: "Let him who has ears heed the Spirit's word to the churches."

This insistent urging was necessary for the simple reason that people have an uncanny faculty of hearing but not really listening. Words go in one ear and out the other, especially when they present a challenge.

And if the challenge is to change one's attitudes, a psychological barrier that words can't penetrate is often erected.

The Gospels hold up Mary as

the model disciple precisely because she both heard and listened. In Luke's account of the Annunciation (1:38), she hears and accepts a message which is well-nigh incredible.

Surely listening wasn't always easy for Mary. When Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple after they feared he had been lost, he asked them: "Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49-50). Luke tells us frankly that "they did not grasp what he said to them."

Even so, Jesus' mother heard his words and continued to make every effort to comprehend.

This ability to listen constituted her personal greatness.

Jesus' disciples present a sharp contrast to his mother. They are sad examples of people who hear — hear repeatedly — but do not listen.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus predicts his passion three times. But each time, it is almost as though they pressed their hands over their ears to keep the words out.

After the first prediction, Peter took Jesus "aside and began to remonstrate with him." So Jesus had to rebuke him sternly: "You are not judging by God's standards but by man's" (Mark 8:32-33).

Peter had just acknowledged that Jesus was the messiah, but he had his own ideas of what a messiah should be: a dashing, conquering hero. Peter had visions of being in the front office when Jesus established his rule.

Jesus' prediction of humble suffering and death ran counter to Peter's preconceived ideas. He heard what Jesus was saying but didn't want to listen.

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