

RELATIONSHIPS 101

Listening

James 1:19-21

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Years ago, Art Linkletter had a live variety show on TV. At the end he would interview small children. He had such a way with kids. One day he asked a little boy what he wanted to be when he grew up. The boy replied, "An airplane pilot." So Linkletter said, "Pretend the plane is in the air and all four engines stop. What would you do?" The little guy replied, "I'd get on the mike and tell everyone to fasten their seat belts. Then I'd get a parachute and jump out!" Everyone of course roared with laughter. But Linkletter noticed the little boy's eyes filling with tears. So he asked the lad, "Why?" The boy replied, "I'd be back. I was just going after gas." We have to learn to listen to all the conversation. Listening takes energy and time.

Here's the problem with social media--Facebook, etc. It's possible to have lots of surface conversations, but nothing meaningful. As one author said, "We feel connected to everything in general and nothing in particular" [Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, p. 133]. Do you remember the movie "Cast Away," starring Tom Hanks? An airplane crash left him stranded on a remote island. He put a face on a volleyball and talked to it. He had conversations. Because we are made for relationships. We long to be known and listened to.

Here is an amazing discovery. The Bible has a lot to say about being a good listener, about listening more than talking. Proverbs 10:19: "The more talk, the less truth; the wise measure their words." Proverbs 17:28: "Even dunces who keep quiet are thought to be wise; as long as they keep their mouths shut, they're smart."

Now our scripture text this morning is pretty simple and clear..."quick to listen, slow to speak..." We often reverse that and get into trouble. Two ears, one mouth. That's God's ratio. You do the math. Notice this passage's context. Verses 17-18 are about God's generous gifts and what God is giving us. And then this word about listening. Listening and receiving are linked. So one who does not listen well to others probably does not listen well to God. And vice versa.

Of course, implied in the work of listening is silence. We cease speaking. We create space for the other person. Do you like anagrams? Taking the same letters of a word and jumbling them around to make a new word. The letters for the word LISTEN also spell SILENT. Worth pondering, right? A curious sentence appears in Revelation 8:1. In the midst of all the noise, thunder peals and chanting, "There was silence in heaven for about half an hour." Curious.

Sad to say, we are all very familiar with false listening or surface listening. Let's recount some really bad substitutes for active listening. First there is the "Yes, but" listening. I am just waiting for you to stop talking so I can argue. Second, there is the "I can top that" listening. We are just

waiting to tell about how the fish we caught was bigger. Then there is what I call the "high caffeine" listening. We aren't really listening or giving eye contact, looking around at other people, or our iPhone or TV while the person is talking to us. In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman reminds us that being in physical proximity is not the same as togetherness. Put your electronic devices down, look at each other. And men, remember that listening is not first of all problem-solving. It is being present, the gift of yourself.

I once heard a conference speaker say that active listening is like doing drive-through at Taco Bell. You place your order then the person inside says, "Let me read that back to you." Then you say, "No, it was one burrito and two tacos..." Clarification. Feedback. Communication. Listening.

Now here's my point. If the secular world has figured out how to listen, if our surrounding culture knows about this, how much more should the people of Jesus be leading the way and modeling it? This is what God in Christ has done for us. He has listened. He has heard...and saved us. Our church has a Stephen Ministry, lay persons trained to listen and care. What a great ministry it has been--and is! God's people equipped for the ministry of listening! In your own life, can't you bear testimony to the power of being listened to?

Many years ago, when I was pastoring in another community, I was at a point in my life where I was deeply hurting. In pain. I had a dream. I dreamed I was in the office of a pastor friend of mine, a Presbyterian pastor with whom I was very close. His name was Lou. In my dream, he said to me, "Pretend I'm Jesus. Tell me what you need to." And in my dream, I wept in release and relief. When I woke up, my pillow was moist.