

Storytellers: The Listener
By Jason Huff
November 1, 2015
Deuteronomy 5:1-6; Mark 7:1-15; Acts 17:16-28

Friends, our final reading today comes from Acts 17:16-28. Let's listen to God's Word together. "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

Did you know there are over a hundred different English accents? There are 42 in the US, 7 in Canada, and 3 in Australia. But Great Britain has us all beat with 56 uniquely different accents. It turns out that the spread of media has caused Britain to lose over half its regional accents in the last 150 years. It makes a huge difference when you listen to someone to know where they're from. How you say "bless your heart" and your locale can be the difference between being called a sweetheart and being called an idiot.

Nobody admits to being a poor listener, but we all struggle with it. I can't remember names unless I write them down and study them. We all have had conversations and a few days later thought, "What was that all about?" We watch television reruns and realize halfway through that we've seen that one; maybe we didn't really listen very well the first time, or we simply forgot what we heard. Sometimes, we have a problem because what someone says isn't what they mean; they code their language about their struggles, and unless you know them well, you might not decode it...like "bless your heart."

We've studied the gospel and sharing it the last several weeks, and we've gotten the story down. We know we're lost in sin but God put together a rescue plan through His son, Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, all who repent of sin and place their faith in Him are saved. We who believe then carry the Holy Spirit, the living water, to all who thirst for God.

So why is it so hard to share that simple story? Possibly, it's because there are no longer cultural spaces (like the town square of old) where people come to hear new ideas and philosophies. Perhaps it's because we've been approached by an odd guy who wanted to tell us about Jesus, and we figure that we all must look like that when we share our faith. Or perhaps we've forgotten the key to good old-fashioned communication: listening.

I want to propose to us today that the key to sharing the gospel is not one-sided conversation. It wasn't for the earliest disciples, and it shouldn't be for us. As we learned last week, Jesus' disciples shared the good news of the Kingdom of God with those who welcomed them and shared their provisions. Our first thought should be to build relationships where the gospel can be heard. I propose there are three tiers of listening that come into play to building gospel-sharing relationships.

First comes listening to God. As we heard in Deuteronomy this afternoon, God made a covenant with the Israelites, commanding them to hear and obey Him. The law was given to Israel twice, once to the generation that died in the wilderness and then again to their children. God wants us to hear Him and follow His voice today, just like the Israelites of long ago.

There is no greater way to get excited about sharing the gospel or way to be trained to give its message than listening to God regularly. God doesn't normally call to us personally and say, "Go befriend that person to share my story with them." But we have Scripture, which has told generations of believers what God asks of us and the promises He has made to us.

When we listen to God, we find that He answers the fears we have about telling others the gospel. Afraid someone might ask if we take creation to be a literal 24-hour 7 days? Check with the Apostle Peter, who said that a day to God is like a thousand years, and know that while God could have done the whole thing in an instant, our faith isn't contingent on reading the poetry of Genesis 1 and 2 as 168 literal hours.

Come up against suffering, and you'll find a multitude of answers in Scripture – everything from God's glory to the development of our souls are reasons God permits struggle. Slavery? Race? Gender? God has spoken about them. You have a pastor, which means you have a guide available to you for the hard questions. But I can promise you that God is speaking.

God also encourages us through His Word to spread the good news of His Kingdom. It might be words of warning, when Jesus says in Matthew 10, "Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown before my Father in heaven." But just the verse before, Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges before men, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven." It might be Paul who encourages us, saying, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

In every situation – in triumph and discouragement, in hope and in sorrow, in boldness to spread the word and cowardice afraid to lose a friend – God talks to us through His Scripture and through His Holy Spirit. The first step to being an effective witness for Him, to speak His truth, is to listen to Him every day.

Next comes the next step of holy listening: *listening to the culture around us*. Now I don't mean taking our cues from society. Society is usually at odds with faith. But Jesus said He was sending us out as sheep among wolves, as shrewd as serpents and as gentle as doves. He sent us out to interact with culture and to transform culture, as much as possible, into His image.

Look at what Paul did in our main passage. He was deep in conversation with local culture. He talked to Jews, to Greeks, to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. While he preached the resurrection of Jesus, he also listened to the voices around him to hear how to reach them. He knew enough about their culture to know that they were taken with the latest ideas and concepts – they weren't simpletons but needed good arguments. And that's what he gives them.

He paid attention even to their altars and idols. He knew the Greeks had an altar to an unknown god. That becomes the centerpiece of his conversation with them. He steers them towards Christ through a concept of their own making, something they could understand, someone they were looking for – that someone turned out to be Jesus Christ.

Not only did Paul pay attention to current Greek culture, he knew the roots of it too. He quotes the 6th century philosopher Epimenides when he says, "In Him (in God) we live and move and have our being." Aratus, another philosopher, said "we are his offspring." He meant it about Zeus, but Paul turns it around to be about the true, living God.

This isn't the only time the apostles do this. Paul quotes Epimenides again in his letter to Titus and the poet Menander in 1 Corinthians. Jude quotes from ancient texts that delve into Jewish myths and legends to make his point. They are in dialogue with the culture – not to accept it as it is, but to use it to help others understand how God is at work.

For us to reach people where they are, we need to be in touch with their culture. I am clueless about sports – but not all of you are. If you're in a sports-loving crowd, share the gospel there effectively by knowing the scores, the names, know the stats. If you're a reader, read the best books you can; if you're a photographer, know apertures and F-stops better than anyone.

And I would encourage you to take avenues to reach people that aren't always explored. In the gaming group Jackson and I joined, we play Dungeons and Dragons. When I was a kid in the early '80s, churches frowned upon Dungeons and Dragons. There were scary creatures, mythological beings, and violence, and it was labeled as harmful, even satanic. But the church never realized that the original creator of Dungeons and Dragons, Gary Gygax, was a Christian who wanted to explore new and fascinating worlds in a game the same way that J.R.R. Tolkien explored the world of Middle-Earth in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkein was a devout Catholic whose perspectives on faith show up throughout his fantasy writings in subtle ways; he took the fantasy genre and transformed it. One of his best friends was C.S. Lewis, an Oxford don who taught mythology. C.S. Lewis eventually became a Christian as well, a Protestant, and he incorporated his love of myth and legend throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He followed in the footsteps of Paul, who used a quote about Zeus to illustrate the reality of YHWH, the one true and faithful God of all creation.

Whatever fascinates you, whatever your hobby or passion, use it in a faithful way to speak about the Kingdom of God. As long as it doesn't contradict Scripture, make you violate God's laws or encourage you to do so, let your Christian freedom come into play. There are churches that minister to bikers, and those folks know their stuff about bikes. Are there bad parts of biker culture? Sure. But Christian bikers have the ability to raise the conversation. So do we, as long as we pay careful attention to the culture around us, appropriating the best of it. All truth is God's truth; if we are listening for it, we will find God working in unusual and unlikely places.

Finally comes *listening to those we are in relationship with*. Jesus knew the issues of the people around Him and their oppression by the Pharisees because He listened to them. He didn't ignore the Pharisees' questions, even though they tried to trap Him. He knew their weaknesses because He listened to their reasoning. He talked with them one on one when they were willing, like Nicodemus. While He had much to teach, He didn't say a word that we know of until the age of 30. Jesus was with His people, among His people, hearing His people's outcry for a savior and knowing that the liberation they wanted from Rome was not the liberation they really needed – the liberation of their souls from sin and death.

We also have Scripture, which in its very nature tells us that God listens to us. The book of Psalms contains 150 different choruses calling out to God – some in praise, some in anguish, some in questioning, some in guilt, some in joy. But they have always been a part of sacred Scripture. For centuries, they were the songs God's people sang to Him; many of our modern songs today incorporate them. They are proof positive that God desires to listen to us; His listening to us is part of His Word! Our answered prayers are proof God listens to us. As God's servants spreading the good news of Jesus, we should expect to do no less.

Real listening not only open doors to people's hearts, it gives us much deeper insight into their true wants and needs. I used to think I was a good listener because people would tell me a problem and I would attempt to give them a wise solution for it. They said they felt listened to, so I assumed I was good at it. But that isn't necessarily the case.

I've learned over time that many people do not want a solution to their problems. Often enough, they know the solution. It's that the solution is hard, painful, or seemingly impossible. They don't want a solution so much as they want someone to hear their pain, to offer them a shoulder to cry on, to be a support. Sometimes they will ask for advice when they know the answer I must give as a pastor – but what they're asking for isn't really what they want. They don't want a divorce so much as they want a loving family. They don't want to quit their job so much as they want fulfillment. They don't want the pleasure of sin so much as they just want something to dull the pain of their experiences.

When we listen, truly listen, we are given the authority to speak the truth of God into their lives. Not platitudes, not easy answers, not even just a “you need Jesus.” The full truth that life is full of burdens, that everything *is* messed up due to sin, and that the rescue Christ provides isn’t so much freedom from pain and suffering so much as it is freedom from guilt and shame and a promise of new life, new hope, and new rightness with God.

Here’s the key to our listening to others: God is present to His people in the Bible. He literally resides with them in the wilderness; He lives with them in the temple; even now, He lives within us, within believers, through His Holy Spirit. He is not far away. He is beyond all worlds, yet He condescends to be near to us. The chief complaint about the idols in Scripture is that they are nothing, they are absent gods, who say nothing and do nothing.

We need to be present to others. We need to put down the electronics, put down the books, put down the screens, and be present. It can be weird! We know how to be present for a few minutes, but then we get a text or an email or a call and then we disappear again. We go to a restaurant to talk with a friend and the television sets distract us. Our ability to be contacted actually makes us less available to be present. Even social networks like Facebook make us feel like we are connected to people when we really aren’t. In fact, all this simple contact is re-wiring our brains, making it harder for us to truly interconnect with one another.

So I invite you to start reconnecting – with family, friends, loved ones, and then move on to co-workers. Choose to eat in the fast food restaurant rather than running through the drive-thru. Make a habit of using a full-service check-out lane at the grocery, where you have to slow down and talk to someone – and maybe a couple someones if it’s the slow lane! Put away the distractions and practice listening. Most families don’t even eat together. Take a few minutes out of your day to do that, with no cell phones, no toys, nothing but however many there are of you being together. It will get us in the habit of listening again.

And know that I am here as your pastor for both sides – to give you a listening ear and to help you practice listening to others. I am available most days for that. In fact, I’m not going to be keeping my regular hours at Panera because no one comes to that. I’d love to be out and have a conversation, and as I’ve found, most people at Panera aren’t looking for one, or they came with the person they want to talk with! Call me, and we can join this journey together.

Friends, God made us in His image. He gave us the ability to communicate in a way that no other creatures can. Communication is the way we come to know the truth of Jesus Christ. Let us practice prayerful listening this week – listening to God, paying attention to our culture’s cues, and then really paying attention to others this week as we seek ways to spread word of God’s Kingdom.