

TWO-TO-ONE

Learning to Listen | Prov 1:5; 1:8; 19:20; Luke 8:18; James 1:19

Remarkable Relationships (Part 5)

A Failure to Communicate

A woman went to a matrimonial lawyer who asked why she was seeking a divorce. "Do you have a grudge?" the attorney inquired. "No, we have a carport," the woman replied. "I'm sorry," said the lawyer, "I'm trying to get at the reason for your desire to end this marriage. Do you have grounds?" "Oh, yes, we have an acre-and-a-half," the client said. "No, no, Ma'am, I'm trying to understand why you're seeking a divorce," said the lawyer. "Did he beat you up?" "No, I get up before him most days." "PLEASE tell me," the attorney exploded, "WHY you want to divorce your husband!" "Oh," she said, "We just don't seem able to communicate."

That's often the issue, isn't it? Whether the relationship is between a couple, a parent and a child, a set of siblings, workmates, or friends, this is what explains why some of our connections don't make it, or never become what we'd like them to be. As we'll touch on this morning and probe further next week, at the core of our difficulties is often a failure to communicate—a failure that frequently has its roots in the trouble we have with really and truly LISTENING.

The Problem is Hole-y Hearing

Jesus once said: "**Consider carefully how you LISTEN**" (Luke 8:18). If you want a remarkable relationship with God or with any other person, consider carefully how you listen. Six times in the gospels, Jesus suggests that it is not enough to simply have ears, you must have "**ears to hear**" (Mark 4:9,23; 7:16; 8:19; Luke 8:8; 14:35). Implicit in this emphasis of Jesus is the frank assertion that – a lot of the time – when we appear to be listening to somebody, we're like the lady in the divorce attorney's office. We seem to be all engaged, but we actually have huge holes in our hearing.

Let's be honest: Listening is hard. For a lot of us, it can be a struggle to maintain eye-contact much less a mind-meld with other people. Because the human brain moves a lot faster than the human tongue, our minds often free-associate when others are talking. Isn't that true? Somebody's telling us about their mother and we start thinking, "I wonder how *my* mom is?" "Did I remember to call her to say thanks for that birthday gift?" "Gosh, I wonder if there are any sales at the Mall this afternoon." "No, what am I thinking? I've got that huge project that needs tending." I call this Bobble-Head Listening. Our heads are still politely nodding at the speaker – "Uh-huh... Mmm... Yeah..." -- but we've zoned out. People would be amazed to know what's going on behind the glazed eyes of our bobble-head. Or they sense the truth about us. We hardly hear a thing. Is this ever true of you?

I think that another reason we sometimes struggle to hear one another is because we have a tendency to measure the satisfaction and effectiveness of a conversation by how much of what is on *our mind* gets said. We resort to what I call Jerky Microphone Listening. When someone else begins talking, we get preoccupied with looking for an opportunity to get the microphone back up to our mouth. Our head is constantly assembling the pieces of what we're going to say next. The longer someone else speaks, the more our anxiety goes up, because this means that we have to keep track of more and more material our head is producing. Then, when someone makes the fateful error of an overlong pause, we break in, blurting out our argument, our better take on the subject, our correction of their viewpoint. We speak fast before the other person can jerk the microphone away again. Ever experience this?

Then there is what I call Springboard Listening. For all the reasons described above, we tune in and out of the listening process. We take in *pieces* of what the other person is saying, but not because we're actually trying to put a meaningful puzzle together that would help us understand them more fully or develop some fresh insight. Instead, we grab a piece of what they've said so that we *appear* like we've been attentive. We then use that piece of information as a springboard from which we can share that prize insight, personal story, opinion, or argument to which we feel *they* should be all ears. The experience of talking with us becomes an adventure in *non sequiturs*. People are left with this weird sense that they had our attention until suddenly we go someplace that really doesn't follow from what they were trying to share with us at all. You can go to parties or gatherings of kids where it feels like almost everyone in the room is spending the whole time spring-boarding from one urgent monologue to the next, desperately trying to tell people about "My Life." It's terribly lonely and unsatisfying to be in a circle like that. We wonder what's wrong with me or them? Why aren't we getting closer?

At other times, a lot of us practice Confirmation Hearing too. This is especially common when we're in conversation with people we already know (or *think* we already know). The older we get the easier it is to become like one of those partisans at a Senate Confirmation Hearings. We think we've got the full brief on the other person -- a complete mental map of what this other person, their position, or their pattern is all about. We know all we really need to know to keep our agenda going. So, we may ask apparently curious questions or appear to listen attentively; but what we're really doing is seizing just those pieces of information that square with our suspicions, that validate our assumptions, that confirm our current viewpoint. We're unconsciously gaveling most of the fresh data that might have been there to hear.

Now, I'm not throwing stones here, because I recognize all of these partial listening practices in myself. I see them being played out on the television news panels and in the halls of congress. From our workplaces to our homes and churches, these practices have become normative. Tragically, we listen like this, in part, because we have often not been heard by others ourselves. But these practices are like holes in the kite of our connections with one another. They are enormously exhausting and unproductive. Everybody works harder and harder to blow air into the kite of the connection, but

because of these holes we struggle to get any real loft. We talk faster, louder, or more intensely – but often to ourselves and past one another, while our relationships sink lower.

The Hope is Holy Hearing

Somehow, we need to change this. **"Take note of this,"** writes the Apostle James, **"Everyone should be quick to listen [and] slow to speak" (Jas 1:19).** Notice the order and the emphasis there. God gave us two ears and one mouth, and He placed the ears higher on the head than the mouth and set them in a two-to-one ratio that is possibly instructive. Our highest priority needs to be to listen and we are meant to be twice the listener that we are the talker. Because I do an awful lot of talking I may be particularly in need of this word, but I'm guessing that there are a lot of us that need to migrate from a pattern of *"Hole-y Hearing"* to a pattern of *"Holy Hearing."* What might this involve?

Well, the primary requirement is to make a conscious change in the way we view the ordinary people with whom we are having these ordinary conversations and remember what is at stake in every one of our interchanges with one another. C.S. Lewis famously begged us to see that: "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization -- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit -- [people on the way to becoming] immortal horrors or everlasting splendors..."

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of [eternal beings], to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. *All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or another of these destinations.* It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics... Our charity [toward one another] must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner... [for] next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."¹

True story: When I was in the midst of preparing this sermon I went out to my car for a moment to get a book. A young man, working on our landscaping crew approached me and, in broken English, asked: "Are you the one I've seen on TV preaching God's Word?" I was in a rush to finish this message. Everything in me wanted to keep this conversation short, but I was writing a sermon on LISTENING! So I felt like I just had to *try* to tune into what this young man was saying. And then he told me how Jesus had recently come into his life and how the Holy Spirit had change him and had saved his family. "People need God's Word", he told me. They need to hear it and take it in. There was such beauty and passion in this young man's faith that I felt my own faith

LIFTED. I asked him his name. "I am *Gabriel*," he said. "Oh," I remarked, "like the angel."

King Solomon, one of the wisest men to ever live, was convinced that we could not possibly reach our holy destination until we learned to stop in our tracks and truly listen to the wisdom that comes to us from others. **"Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance"** (Prov 1:5). **"Listen, my [child], to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching"** (Prov 1:8). **"Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise"** (Prov 19:20). Do you practice this?

I am slowly discovering that my worst enemies, the people who rub me the wrong way, the person who prattles on or doesn't have the degrees I do, the guy or gal below me on the org chart, the old person who doesn't use social media, the children who pass through my house -- even the man with the lawn trimmer who hardly speaks my language -- these people KNOW things that I don't. They know things about God and life... about my besetting sins... about where joy is found and hope is recovered... that I am going to completely miss if I don't stop demanding to be listened to so much and instead really listen to them. Who has the wisdom you need to become the **"everlasting splendor"** God wants you to be? When they speak to you this week, will you be listening?

And remember this in closing: They need your listening ear too. So, try this this week: Cut in half the talking you do. Double the listening. When someone speaks, put away the distractions. Turn your whole self to them. Notice everything about their face as they speak. Note the tone in their voice and the cast of their body and what these tell you, even more than their words. Ask them: What do you want to tell someone? What do you dream about and hope for? What brings you joy? What is hurting you or worrying you right now? What have you experienced of God? What are the truths you know and the ideas you have that could make a difference if someone listened? What do you think I need to take in or start to do differently? How can I help you get to your desired destination?

C.S. Lewis was right: All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other upward or downward on this great kite flight we call Life. And the good news is that this is the start of a new day. Everywhere you go from here, you will be meeting immortal beings, creatures so precious to God and essential to you that Jesus came to give his life for them. SO... will you be just another one of those regular people with holes in their hearing, or will you be one of those remarkable people whose love is known by the truly holy way you LISTEN?

Please pray with me...

Lord, we think of how much you knew and had to say when you walked the streets and hallways of this world. Yet time and again, you stopped to offer people the gift of your loving presence. You asked them questions and cared to truly listen. We want to be

like You. Believing that it is still through the power of hearing that two can become one, we re-covenant today – with you and for the sake of all our relationships, to become better listeners. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 14-15.