Sermon – Listening with Love

Scripture: James 1:19-25 Sunday, July 9, 2017

Last Sunday, I shared with you about the BLESS movement that is moving through Kansas city. It is a movement that is seeking to connect 50 churches with the sole purpose of blessing the neighborhoods. The BLESS movement asks the question, what if the church goers where a blessing to their neighbors where ever they live, work and play. These ideas are not new in the history of the church. The BLESS movement is simply a repacking for our time what the church have been doing from the very beginning of the history of the church. I believe if we as a congregation were to internalize the principles and rhythms of the BLESS movement, we will be able to fully flavor the neighborhood that God has sprinkled us in. Last Sunday we began this journey with the first B in Bless, which was beginning with prayer. We talked about how we come to church every Sunday to formulate our exit strategy. That means our game plan when we walk out of the doors at the end of the service. I explained the mapping that is available of our neighborhoods so that we can actually get onto a neighborhood map that looks like a google map, mark where we live, and sign up to pray for a certain number of homes around your home. Then the software would pick up not just addresses but names of people who live there and send you weekly reminders to pray for your neighbors by name. And when you have prayed, you get to click the button in the prayer email so they know that these homes have been prayed for. Now if you believe in prayer, then you have to believe that this movement is going to work in amazing ways in our city.

Today, we are going to move to the next alphabet in the acronym, L which stands for listen. Now, listening is something that we don’t give much thought to, but the ability to listen is one of the most important skills anyone can possess. After all God gave us two ears and only one mouth right? That means God was saying, make sure you listen at least twice as much as you talk. In a recent book I read about FBI hostage negotiations, the author was explaining that one of the important tools that the FBI uses in any high stakes negotiators is a bank of 4 or 5 people whose only job is to listen very carefully to the person on the other end. They listen and pass notes on what they are observing to the chief negotiator. Why do they do this? Because there is a basic fact about human attention. Our attention is very limited. So even when we are in conversation with someone else, we are usually focused not on them but our own agenda. The hostage negotiator, is very focused on trying to get the hostage out of the hands of the kidnapper for example. But it is not just our own agenda that are minds are preoccupied with. Our mind is also busy judging the other person. Imagine this knucklehead in Columbia has kidnapped an American tourist and is asking for $150,000 by Friday or else he will have this man’s guts removed while the whole thing is being video taped so that the tape can be mailed to the family. If you were the one responsible to negotiate with this kidnapper would you be able to resist thinking in your head, what a horrible person you are dealing with and that this guy should go to hell? The problem with this is that, with your brain trying to focus on your mission of getting the hostage out and thinking how horrible the kidnapper is, you don’t have much brain space to really listen to the person on the other side. And in every situation, when you don’t listen carefully you miss really important information that would have changed everything. Because, an FBI hostage negotiation is a life and death situation, they cannot afford to miss something so they have a whole listening team to help the chief negotiator. In this particular case because they listened very carefully, they were able to figure out that the kidnapper was not a political operative but a regular thug out to make a fast buck and they were able to bring down the $150,000 demand to just around $4000 and get the hostage out safely. Now, you may think, I will never be involved in those kinds of life and death negotiations. But think about this, as Christ ambassadors, our day to day interactions with the people around us really are conversations that shape people’s eternal life. So when you think about it, our simple grocery store conversations do have life and death implications as well. And if it does, should we not be listening very carefully as well?

James chapter 1 verse 19 could not be more clear about this, he says, “understand this my dear brothers and sisters, you must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.” In other words, keep your emotions in check, pay careful consideration to the other side and jump in only when you have though carefully about your words. In the book of Proverbs Solomon says this, “if one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame”. In other words, even the wisest man who ever lived will tell you that running your mouth before you have heard the other person out is both stupidity and shameful. Now being a good listener can help you in all sorts of ways in your professional and personal lives. But today, I want to talk about listening as a tool to bless your neighbors.

Today I am going to talk about the ABC’s of listening. The A of listening is Asking questions. You have heard people say, you get what you ask for. I think you can qualify that further by saying that, the quality of information you get is dependent on the quality of the questions you ask. If someone is giving you mono syllable answers it is because you were asking questions that can be answered in one word. Did you have a good day? You will get one word back, “yes”. You will not get a “no” because “no” will illicit a follow up. The second kind of question is called in the open ended question. If you were to ask, “what was the best part of your day today?” That is an open ended question and you will get much more information out of the reply. Open ended questions makes people think, you get quality information out of the interaction and the person you are talking to feels like you really cared.

Jesus was always asking open ended questions to people around him. One of the questions that have always wondered about is when two of John the baptist’s followers after hearing about Jesus start following Jesus. And how does Jesus respond to these two people? He asks them “what do you want?”. It may sound rude to our ears but that question gets them thinking about what they are doing. These two people think and answer with another question, they want to know where he is staying. When they ask that Jesus now knows that they literally want to stay with Jesus. That was how they did it in those days. If you wanted to be disciple by someone you had to literally stay with them. That way you pick up not only the teachers words but his actions as well. And Jesus was able to get all this by asking these two people who were walking behind him an open ended question. The best open ended questions are “what” and “how” questions. Just one caution, be very careful with the “why” questions because “why” questions are inherently confrontational unless they are used very skillfully. So if you want to open up the conversation with someone ask lots of what and how questions. How was your day could be a simply opener. How did that activity go, gets more specific. How did that make you feel, lets you go to an even deeper level. What does that look like for you, is a what question that can help open up the conversation. Of course your specific open ended questions will look different, but remember “what” and “how” are the keys to winning the asking game and if you want to be a good listener it all begins with what you ask in the first place.

Now once you have asked the question, and you get the other person to start talking you are going to opening the flood gates and get all kinds of information. And how you react to this information will define how the conversation proceeds from there. If the other person’s values are not our own, our tendency will be to become judgmental. Negative emotions start welling up inside of us and that shows in your body language to the other person. If the other person starts getting negative vibes from you know that you are not going to get very far with the conversation or the relationship and that is a tragedy because that is not what Jesus would have done. In the story of the woman caught in adultery, when Jesus is brought this woman, who had sinned, Jesus had every right to judge her. But he does not. Instead he tells them they can start stoning with the one who has never sinned casting the first stone. Just this one line from Jesus and these hardened old chaps become embarrassed of their own sins, drop their stones and turn to leave the scene. But those words of Jesus ring across the barriers of time and geography and culture and reach us right here. We too need to open our hands and drop the stones we are holding in our hands and open our hearts to our neighbors in a non-judmental way. We extend grace because we have first received it. When we listen without judgment we create a safe environment where people can truly begin to share their lives with us. Now I want to add a caveat here. You and I are going to fail, even in this area of not being judgmental. It is hard for me. I can tell you that. But if you start becoming negative, listen to yourself and catch yourself. You can still save the situation before things get out of hand. Listening without judgment is when real listening begins.

Once you get the person to start talking with your “how” and “what” questions, and put the brakes on judging them, it takes us to the C of listening, listening with Compassion. Once again I turn to the example of Jesus who was the most compassionate person who ever walked the earth. When people followed him for three days as he spoke to them, he is filled with compassion and tells this disciples to feed them, when he looks at the city of Jerusalem, he weeps over it with compassion, when he sees the suffering of Mary and Martha and the death of Lazarus he weeps again with compassion, when he saw a widow who had lost her son in the village of Nain, he is once again filled with compassion and actually brings her son back to life again. You see, Jesus does not just look at people and their issues, he is moved by them. And that is the third step of being a good listener. Listening with compassion. Now our tendency in the conversation as I pointed out in the beginning of the sermon is to focus on ourselves. Even when we are talking to someone else, we are thinking about our agenda. And when we hear something that does not fit our worldview it sends a flood of negative emotions into our minds. The person you are talking to is going to pick up on this and shut you off and that will be the end of the conversation or even the relationship. If we want to be a Christ follower however and not self-absorbed individuals we need to open up to other people and allow other people to open up to us. And not just hearing what they have to say but sensing their emotional state and allowing ourselves to be moved by your listeners emotional state, just like Jesus was moved every time he was in the presence of human suffering. That is what it means to have compassion. So the third component to Listening well is Listening with Compassion.

The ABC’s of listening, listening by Asking opened ended questions, hitting the Brakes on being judgmental and hitting the accelerator on Compassion. I came across this talk on listening last week by a woman name Ronnie Polaneczky. She was sharing that one day there was an art festival in her town of West Philadelphia and she when to this place, put up two chairs and put a big notice that said, “I will listen with compassion, without judgment, with an open heart. So is there something you need to say? If so, tell me, I will listen.” People came and sat of the chairs all day long and talked and talked. They had all kinds of conversations all day. And at the end of it, she came to this realization that people are dying to be heard and known.

Now my challenge to us today is this, what if the church, what if our church was known in our neighborhoods as a place where people can come and talk and they will be heard without judgment and with compassion? Would that be a way of making our presence left? Would it be a way to express to our neighborhood the compassion and love that we have experienced from Christ. Would it be a way to love and bless our neighborhood? Most definitely, because as on other listening expert put it, “listening is one of the most powerful ways to love”. What if our church community were the people that our neighbors sought out when they needed to be heard? Let us pray.