

## “Listening”

James 3:1-12

Have you ever wondered what God does in his heavens? What does the omnipotent, almighty, timeless King of the Universe do? I think one of his primary activities is listening: God listens to us.

The book of Exodus tells us: “During that long period, the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help, because of their slavery, went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.” (Exodus 2:23-24).

Later in Exodus, after the Lord delivered the Israelites from Egypt, he said to Moses, “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites.” (Exodus 16:12).

The psalmist wrote, “God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.” (Psalm 66:19).

When Jesus stood before Lazarus’ tomb, ready to raise Lazarus who had been dead for 4 days, he “looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’” (John 11:41-42).

God listened to people in the Bible, and he also listens to us. He hears us when we struggle and cry out. He hears our prayers, our thanksgiving, our praise, and our laments. He even hears our unspoken communication. Through his prophet Isaiah God said, “Before they call I will answer; while they are still

speaking I will hear.” (Isaiah 65:24).

That’s the kind of listener God is. He became one of us so he knows exactly what it’s like to live in our lives and face the challenges and temptations we face. In Jesus, God has responded to all he hears – to all our prayers, questions, wails, cries for mercy, complaints, and pain. He listens and he has answered us once and for all time by sending his only Son to die and rise for us, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

In Jesus, God got really involved in our lives. In Jesus, God truly empathized with us. In Jesus, God shared our journey. In Jesus, God listened and got involved.

If we follow Jesus, we too, are real listeners who get involved. We empathize. We share one another’s journey. And according to James 1:19, we are “quick to listen and slow to speak.” It may not seem like much. Sometimes we just want to rush in and solve the other person’s problems with our wise words. Instead, we learn from God’s example and James’ word in this morning’s epistle reading that it is better to listen, to enter into the other’s pain, to understand.

As our experienced Stephen Ministers have told me for years, “after much listening, our few words will be much more wise and compassionate.” And the wonderful surprise is that God works through our caring listening to bring about healing and peace.

On the other hand, when we don’t listen, when we don’t shut-up, our

tongues can get us in all kinds of trouble. James chapter 3 is his famous treatise on the tongue, and there's some serious wisdom here for us to think about before we open our mouths to share some "interesting information" about someone else.

To understand James' viewpoint here, we need to remember that in the first century there were no televisions, no computers, no mail, no cell phones or anything else with which to pass on information. There was only something called "oral tradition" by which information was passed around and passed down to the next generation until somebody had the time and took the time to write it down. Even the four gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were passed around orally until they were written down 40 years after Jesus' resurrection. So James and his contemporaries, 2,000 years ago experienced how destructive an out-of-control tongue could be.

James uses a series of metaphors to show just how dangerous even a little bit of indiscreet speech can be. The tongue is a small part of the body, says James, but like the rudder on a ship or a bridle on a horse, the tongue can steer us either to the path of wisdom or toward destruction. It takes only a spark; a misplaced, unkind, or untrue word – to burn down a family or a community that has been nurtured and established like an old growth forest.

Listen again to verses 3-6 . . . "If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very

small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

James reminds us that the power of words to both bless and curse is a power not to be taken lightly, particularly when our words are directed at God and, more precisely, at people who are created in God’s image.

Verse 9: “With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

So, once again, because God created us in his image, we are blessed with the ability to make choices. Each of us can choose to listen more and speak positively or we can choose to listen less and to use our tongue negatively.

Before we say something to someone, how many of us take the time to think about if what we’re about to say is going to build up the other person, or build up the family or the church or the community or is what we’re about to say going to tear down the other person, the family, the church, or the community? Are we speaking to build up or to tear down?

When studying philosophy in college, Socrates was required reading. He suggested the three filter test before speaking.

The first filter is TRUTH. Are you absolutely sure the statement is true?

The second filter is GOODNESS. Does the statement say something good about another person?

The third filter is USEFULNESS. Is the statement useful in some way?

In our Stephen Ministry training we spend time practicing to listen more and speak less. But even when we've learned to talk less, there are often other distractions that can keep us from being effective listeners.

I remember when one of our interns in Nebraska was telling me about a recent home visitation he had done. The elderly woman who was lonely and depressed welcomed his visit and invited him into the living room to sit down in an easy chair – with the television news on in front of him. As she was telling her story, often repeating herself, he found himself listening more to the news than to her. He was embarrassed when she had to ask him a second time if he would like a cup of coffee.

I told him that many elderly folk living alone often have the T.V. on all day long, so for them it's a very familiar background noise. They often don't think of turning it off when a visitor comes. Next time, just ask if you can turn it off before you sit down, which is what I've learned to do.

I tell our Stephen Ministers that you have to have the desire to be a good listener, the patience to be a good listener, and the ability to listen to what's not being said either with their body language or their surroundings.

Listening is a skill we all can continue to improve. It is a skill that is

valuable for you not only as a member of our congregation caring for one another, but also as more caring and effective parents, spouses, bosses, employees, students, teachers, neighbors, and citizens.

As we become better listeners, we can also become more faithful disciples. When we're truly listening to God, we're more likely to respond to what we hear.

By his death and resurrection, Jesus has made it possible for us to have a relationship with God based on love, forgiveness, and communication. One of the best ways we can work on that relationship from our end is to simply "listen".

Let us pray. Listening Lord, we pour out our hearts to you during this time of worship in praise, sorrow, profound need, or joyous thanksgiving. You are always there for us – listening, caring, and healing. Give us the patience, compassion, and skill we need to follow your example and also be good listeners. Bless us through this time of worship as we listen to you. Give us opportunities like Stephen Ministry to listen to one another and use our care for one another to build bonds of Christian love between us. Thank you for listening to our prayer that we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

May the peace of God . . .

#703 - O God, Why Are You Silent

