



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"They Nevah Like Listen"

(How to Have Healthy Relationships Series)

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My message for you today is about listening. But first, some stories and large group quizzes.

In school sports, there are mascots and school nicknames that are mysterious, misleading, or enigmatic. There are some that even make us feel downright ignorant because we don't know what these nicknames mean.

Take for example the University of Alabama. Most people think their nickname is The Crimson Tide, and that's why their battle cry is "Roll Tide!" If you're uninitiated in sports, you might think the names are referring to a detergent, but that's not the case. "Crimson Tide" and "roll tide" are not even Alabama's official nickname. Do you know what it is? It is "the elephant." That's right they should technically be known as The Alabama Elephants. (As you can see my preaching is deep and full of expositional, exegetical facts, whatever that means.)

Next question: The University of Maryland's nickname is the terrapins. What is a terrapin? A North American turtle found in fresh or brackish waters. Now what does this have to do with my sermon on listening? Don't worry; we'll get there soon.

Next, and this is the final one. The Ohio State University football team, The National Champions who mercilessly defeated

Marcus Mariota and the Oregon Ducks, is known as the Ohio Buckeyes. Question: What is a buckeye? That's right; a nut! When working with the Buckeye nut you have to listen carefully to the directions on how use it or else you die, literally!

First some background. The name of the Buckeye reportedly comes from Native Americans who saw the shelled glossy, brown, shiny nut as something like the eye of a male deer. In other words, the eye of a buck.

The buckeye has been considered to be a good luck charm. Some believe that if you carry a buckeye in your pocket, you may get relief from rheumatism pain. Some people think it is good to eat. But if you are listening (the theme of the sermon), you need to hear everything about the nut and need to be careful before you eat. The nuts grow on the tree in a spiny hull until they ripen in September, and then the hull comes apart and the nut falls to the ground.

Don't stop listening because there is more. Here's the rest of the description: the buckeye nuts are slightly POISONOUS and should NOT be eaten unless heated or leached. AH YA! It pays to listen to everything a person says! We have to be quick to listen and slower to act!

Too often, people – they *nevah* like listen, as we say in pidgin English. They *nevah* like listen; they don't want to listen; or they listen and

then their minds shut off before the other person is finished telling them important information.

We are in the midst of a series on how to have healthy relationships. Last week's sermon was a warning against gossip. Before that – how to handle irritable people and how be gracious. Today, it's how to listen. If we listen well, our community will always be healthy. If we don't, well, it could be costly.

This morning I am going to give some real, practical advice on how to listen better to our friends, co-workers, spouse, relatives, children, and friends. Actually everybody! So whether you are listening to this here in the sanctuary or on our church app, on your iPad or iPhone or the website or daily on TV, grab a notepad and take notes.

Let's start with our Bible passage for today. It's just a short one, and we may have read it before. It may have slipped by us because we just scanned it. Or maybe we have never really studied the principles behind it. It's from a letter written by a man named James, who was the brother of Jesus.

James was also the pastor of the Jerusalem church, so he had a lot of credence being the half-brother of Jesus. Imagine him getting into an argument at a party. If someone challenged him, "Who do you think you are," James will say, "I'm the brother of Jesus."

And the other person will just say, “Okay, you’re right.”

Or if James were in the old TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, and Regis Philbin says to James, “You seemed to be stumped with that question. Do you want to use a lifeline by calling someone?” And James would say, “Oh yeah, I would like to ask my brother. He kinda knows everything.” No fair! It is believed that James was educated because his writing in Greek in this letter is so good, so classic. Wonder if he was homeschooled by his older brother?

So here we go: It’s from the first chapter and the nineteenth verse from the Book of James, chapter 1:19-20: *“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be QUICK TO LISTEN, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”*

Did you hear that? Quick to listen! I love that. Too often we are slow to listen. We just like to talk. We like to interrupt. We like to finish people’s sentences and stories because we think we say it better, or we think our way is always right.

Yet, what does the Bible say about that? Hear what Proverbs says: *“Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice.” (Prov. 12:15)*

You know, way too often, when people have dinner, one party dominates the other in conversation even though the dinner could be so much more refreshing and inspiring if questions were asked more instead of making it a time to tell your story over and over again. We miss out on learning by not listening.

You have heard how I was surprised when I read one day a

fascinating anecdote about the late famous director-producer-writer Mike Nichols. He is one of those rare people who has won, are you ready for this – an Emmy for TV, a Grammy for the Music industry, an Oscar for movies, and a Tony Award for Theater. That is simply an amazing accomplishment! Imagine his life lessons learned and the adventures he must have had.

In addition, he is married to Diane Sawyer, former anchorwoman for ABC World News and previously the co-anchor of Good Morning America, anchor of CBS Morning News and the first female 60 Minutes correspondent. Mike Nichols noted that his wife has traveled all around the world and has met some of the most powerful and interesting people on earth; and yet when they have dinner with people, he is stunned at how few questions his wife is actually asked. Instead, most people prefer to talk about themselves.

I think he was humble in saying, “And also, no one asked me any questions, either.” Two incredibly experienced, wise, accomplished people who are rarely asked questions during dinner!

When we like to talk and not listen and thereby not learn, we really deprive ourselves of life. We shrivel, or worse yet we die from eating fresh buckeyes because we didn’t hear the warning to heat or leach them first. So I am going to give real, practical advice on listening for God does call us to hear the word. And if we don’t hear His words we can’t be doers of the Word.

My first foundational point is this: **Real, authentic, genuine listening is something to be learned, practiced, and cherished.** Listening is a process, a life-long process. Maybe that is why God gave us two ears and one mouth.

We can always learn more tips on how to listen better but we also need to practice them. In fact, I am hoping you will put into practice these tips that I am going to give you today, and that you’ll keep practicing them.

Here is why listening is hard: **We don’t pay attention. Our minds are somewhere else.** When someone talks to us, often times we are hearing words but our minds are somewhere else asking, “Where do I agree or disagree? What will I say in response? We use a big part of our brain to prepare for what we are ABOUT to say, which means the focus is ON US.

But in true listening, the spotlight should be on the other person. Alan Glendining, a British Rector of once said: “Love is not so much a matter of being willing to listen as of wanting to hear.”

Sometimes people ask me, “Dan, so what did you say when they said that issue to you?” I say, “I said nothing, because I was listening. I wasn’t forming my thoughts but trying to hear their thoughts. So I had no comeback. I didn’t have follow up questions because I was trying to feel what they were feeling, and I was too busy doing that.

So if you are talking to me, and I look dumb and unresponsive, there’s a good chance I’m listening to you. Actually I am like a duck, not an Oregon duck, just a duck, where I might seem still on the surface but I am actually paddling hard under water as my emotions and listening skills are hard at work.

Maybe we should choose leaders not on their ability to talk but on their ability to listen. We like politicians who talk, talk talk. We elect them because they talk well and are eloquent. But maybe we should choose leaders who can also LISTEN well.

I like what author William Ury once said, “What if on TV news we had not talk shows but listen shows? What if during war we had not Peace Talks but Peace Listens.”

One of the greatest gifts we can give is the gift of being heard. Taylor Caldwell once said, “The desperate need of men today is not a new vaccine for any disease, but is the terrible need for someone to listen to him, not as a patient but as a human soul.” (Revo.Comm.,p.2)

It takes a lot of energy to listen—listening is what is said and what is not being said. We have to ask ourselves: What is behind the words? What are the underlying emotions and needs?

So if listening is so important, then why don’t we all do it? Because listening is really hard. And get this: We might listen well at work, but not necessarily to our spouse or friends. We listen hard at the office but some times we let down at home.

To be fair, we need to acknowledge that there is a lot of static, noise, and distractions in life. We don’t have the emotional bandwidth to take the time to listen. We are often exhausted and to listen takes energy and space.

So you say, “Dan, this is really hard. Okay, already. Give us some tips on how to listen well.” Here it comes. And I thank Dave Kusumoto for teaching me some of this. First, principle of good communication is:

1) Get the order right.

I am going to ask Charlie and Zan Timtim to come up now. Nothing epitomizes a lack of communication more than the famous Rap Replinger drama of “Room Service” with Mr. Fogerty in his hotel room placing a room service order, as we shall see

again in this reenactment. (“Room Service” was reenacted.)

Okay, this drama illustrates the point of the need to get the order right. Imagine a restaurant. A waiter is taking the order of a customer. The customer is speaking and the food server is supposed to be listening. The customer is the boss of the relationship. The customer determines when the server has got it right. ONLY when the customer acknowledges that the server has got it right, can the server go and do his or her job. The boss determines when the listener has got it right.

For the waiter to get it right, it often means that he or she needs to practice active listening or ask clarifying questions. That’s what we need to do in our friendship, business relationships, and family.

Sometimes the customer or speaker needs help in communicating what’s needed, and the waiter needs to listen to serve them more properly. Our drama showed how common mistakes such as how the listener can “think” they got it right without truly understanding.

The first action, take-away is listeners should develop the habit of simply repeating the order back to the speaker. It seems simplistic but repeating back the order to make sure they got it right prevents people from the common mistakes of assuming they understand. It also prevents the tendency to offer fixes or solutions to the speaker when he is not even asking for solutions. So when your friend or spouse is asking you to do something, repeat it back to them.

“So you want me to pick up the ice cream after work and hurry home so it doesn’t melt. Right?”

“Right.”

“So you want me to stop leaving my tools out on the table and move them some place else?”

And the wife says, “No, I am saying that you move your tools and put them back in your tool box and not leave them somewhere else!”

See, how repeating helps with clarity and avoids more conflict? Second tip, and trust me if you follow these guidelines it will save you a tone of headaches:

2) Name the feeling.

Listening well does not only mean being able to repeat what was said, but also being able to identify what the speaker is feeling. If you get this, it is worth gold.

In every communication, ask yourself, “Can I name the feeling?” One of the main purposes of listening is to empathize with the speaker. To name the feeling is to quickly identify what the speaker is feeling or going through.

A classic example is a wife who is upset at her husband and complaining that he was late for something. Being a good listener, the husband would quickly say something like, “That must have been very frustrating for you, when I was late”.

The husband is naming the feeling. He is not giving excuses, like “The boss gave me a late assignment,” or worse yet, “I was hungry so I stopped by Champions for malasada.”

Name the feeling first. If you don’t take care of that, it doesn’t matter what you say later. You can say this: “You are frustrated that I was late. It wasn’t fair to you, and you were looking to leave on time. Our dinner that evening was really important to you. I let you down.”

Believe me, if you can name the feeling and address it, you will have better communication and avoid conflict. It is because in most communication the FEELING needs to be addressed more than the facts. Got it? Say, "Yes, I'm listening."

3) Baseline commitment

In relationships at work, sports, with friends, and especially in marriage, it is important to remember that your relationship has a baseline commitment. In marriage, the baseline commitment is a lifelong commitment of love to each other. In friendships, it's a commitment that you are for each other and not on opposite teams. In the workplace, it may be "I am committed to working well together with you so that we can accomplish the mission of the organization. I am not against you. I want the best for you."

The quickest way to a resolution to a conflict is to be reminded of the baseline commitment of love towards each other. Both parties need reminding that we are "for each other," When we are reminded of the baseline commitment, it helps resolve a major obstacle in communication, which is: Are you for me or not?" Having a strong baseline understanding of the commitment of love to one another can help dissolve offenses and questions of intention.

When there is a block in communication, there may need to be a reinstatement that "I am for you. I am committed to you. I am sorry what I did muddied that."

A friend told me that her boss was yelling at her in the office one day, and suddenly she responded, "I am not your enemy! I am with you trying to make you succeed." And that changed their whole relationship from then on as he was reminded and

believed that she was not his enemy but an ally. She even got promoted later.

The fourth is this, and I got this from William Ury, the author of *Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. He's the co-founder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation so he is worth listening to. Here is his thought on listening.

4) We have to listen to ourselves first before we can listen to others.

We need to take some moments of quiet to find out what is happening inside of us. Is there a reason I am not listening? What is going on inside of me? I need to back off and think.

It's what we Christians call "quiet time." We all try to have regular quiet times, daily if possible, when we pray or read a Bible passage or a devotional book that reminds us to look to God to get a better perspective on things. He is always the same. He's our North Star when we are lost. The words from the Bible, the words of God are absolute and constant.

We might have fear or anxiety before that meeting with the boss or a colleague or a child or a spouse or a friend. And so we need regular quiet times to check in on how are we feeling that day, and then hopefully get some guidance from God before we get into that conversation.

5) It is important to listen to God for He listens to you.

God wants to talk to us. He wants to be with us. Jesus said: "*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*" (Luke 8:21)

We talk about the

importance of being a follower of God. But we can't be followers unless we listen to God. That is the mark of God's people. Jesus said: "*My sheep hear My voice. I know them, and they follow Me.*" (John 10:27)

But know this. God is a good listener. Talk to Him. He knows our hearts. As it's written in the Bible, "*Hear the voice of my supplication, as I cry to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward Your most holy sanctuary.*" (Psalm 28:2)

But get this. The writer of the Psalms also wrote this in confidence about God's listening. "*I call upon You, for You will answer me, O God; incline Your ear to me, hear my words.*" (Psalm 17:6)

More importantly, Jesus is always trying to connect with us. He said in the very last book of the Bible: "*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with Me.*" (Rev 3:20)

Isn't it amazing that in some of the last words of Jesus, He says to us LISTEN, HEAR MY VOICE. Listen to the Holy Spirit. He said, in the last book: "*Let anyone who has an ear LISTEN to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*" (Rev. 3:22)

Is it not amazing, that God in the heavens hears our prayers, and that He came down to earth to live among us and hear and be with us? This is the God who, from the beginning of time, desired to be with us and eat with us and live with us and heart our conversation. So as we have a God who listens to us, may we be really good listeners to one another.

Let everyone be quick to listen and slow to speak, just as it says in the Bible. Amen!