26 May 2013: Pakuranga Baptist Church

Every Day Conversations: 3. Listen like never before

Mark 10:46-52



Big Idea: Develop active listening skills

One of the most famous of Martin Luther King’s sermons is called ‘A Knock at Midnight.’ In this sermon he retells a story that Jesus told in Luke 11 about a man who went and banged on his neighbour’s door at midnight asking for three loaves of bread. In Jesus story the neighbour complains “we are all asleep. We don’t want to get up,” but in the end he gets up and gives his neighbour what he needs. In his message Luther subtly changes the meaning of Jesus story. He says that the man asking for bread is like the ordinary man or woman in the street. The neighbour asleep in his house is like the Church, and he said that (at that time) it was like the average black person in America was knocking, knocking, knocking on the door of the Church in the midnight hour of their need simply asking for the bread of justice, the bread of economic equality and the bread of brotherhood to be shared in their land. That image is a powerful one even 50 years later on –of the average black American standing, outside banging on the door of the Church asking for help, while the Church is kind of reluctant and uncomfortable to come as quick as they can!

The irony I believe is that people are still banging on the door of the Church in our land this day. They are not literally banging on the front door of PBC’s building –this building is not the Church. Instead they are tapping on our hearts and our minds everywhere that we, the Church of Jesus Christ go in our week –in our schools, at our uni, on the job, at our clubs, with our mates, in the streets and in our retirement homes. They are knocking, knocking, knocking… asking something special of us –asking something of you and I. And they are not asking for very much at all. They are in fact requesting very little. Do you know what they are asking for? They are simply asking for us to listen to them! They want us to listen!

The tragedy today is that we live in a world where there is so little true listening. Our lives has become so hurried, so busy, and at times so noisy and loud that we don’t really have time to linger with each other and to hear what’s really going on in the hearts of our families, our colleagues and neighbours. The truth is that most of us given the chance to talk to others actually want them to listen to us, so I believe that we face a famine of listening in our land that Jesus wants us as His Church to address.

Consider this. I am currently studying for a Certificate in Professional Supervision at the University of Auckland. Professional Supervision is where a person comes once a month as part of their job and discusses they may be facing in their work. The hope is that they will learn from that discussion. Now supervision has a particular style and approach. It is normally paid for. But I found myself asking in class the other day, what did people do before they sought professional supervision? My conclusion is I guess they had friends! In fact the supervision lecturer told us about a former student who simply rushed into her office one day asking if she could talk about something distressing that had happened that day at work. One and half hours later the person said, “Sorry, but I just had to come and see you. You see at our work they don’t really encourage us to listen to each other!”

We all need listening. Psychologist, Mary O’Reilly, said, “Attention and deep listening are important. People are dying in spirit for lack of it.” Writer Eugene Peterson said, “Listening is in short supply in the world today; people aren’t used to being listened to.” And here’s a statistic from the USA -American dads are estimated to listen to their children for less than 2 minutes per day (that’s less than 120 seconds per day). I hope we can do better than that in New Zealand!

So how good a listener are you? There’s a small test on the back of the sermon insert in

the newsletter that you can do later, but you might like to simply ask yourself -When others are talking to me . . . Do I find myself finishing their sentences? Do I give my opinions before hearing them out? Do I get restless and impatient? Do I lose track of what is being said? Do I fidget with objects? Do I mentally rehearse what I am going to say next? Do take control of the conversation? Do I interrupt with frequent comments or questions? Do I try to immediately diagnose their problems? Do I worry about how to respond instead of listening? Do I tell them how to fix their problem? Do I listen briefly and then begin talking? Do I tend to contradict what has just been said? Do I misinterpret what has been said? Do I answer before gaining real understanding? You can do the test yourself later on, but if you answered ‘Yes’ to at least 4 or 5 then you could benefit by improving your listening skills.   
Take Jesus for instance. He was a great listener and it had a significant spiritual impact upon the people around Him. For example in the passage that we read earlier Jesus was passing through the town of Jericho. Jesus with his disciples were travelling as part of a great larger crowd. Many of them were travelling up to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. As they were leaving the city they passed through the place where the beggars sat. It’s always a good spot to sit right outside the city gate. Everyone has to pass there and you might be tossed a few coins from folk on the way in or out.

That day a blind man named Bartimaeus was sitting there. It’s interesting that we have his name because Bartimaeus is one of the very few people healed by Jesus who is ever specifically named in the Bible. Normally people wouldn’t have bothered too much with a person like him. He sat at the edge of the main road, on the very margins of society, a blind man begging for help –who really needed to know his name? But the Bible names him, Bartimaeus –which means ‘son of Timaeus.’

As he is sitting there he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is coming past, and he begins to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Or as it says in in the Greek, “Jesus, Son of David, be compassionate upon me!” Have compassion upon me!

Now I don’t know about you, but I don’t like it when people yell unless it’s at sports, so the crowd starts telling him to shut up. “Beggar, pull your head in! You don’t count. Beggar, Jesus isn’t interested! Shut up!” But that doesn’t put him off. He shouts all the louder, “Jesus, Son of David, be compassionate upon me!”

So you have a big noisy crowd, like in our foyer, the crowd is yelling, the man is yelling, Jesus is leaving the city, he’s got places to go that day, but somehow Jesus hears him calling and immediately He stops in his tracks. He says, “Call the man to me.” Suddenly the crowd completely reverse its opinion and they’re going, “Oh, it’s your lucky day mate. Jesus is calling for you. Cheer up. Get on up.” So he jumps to his feet and goes towards Jesus. Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” (You see Jesus was listening to last week’s sermon –he asks ‘How can I help you?’). The beggar replies, “Teacher, I want to see.” Jesus says, “Go. Your faith has healed you,” and immediately the man can see and follows Jesus down the road!

Now the point of the story is that the beggar asked Jesus for the right thing –something that Jesus could give him. In the preceding story James and John ask if they can be great rulers in heaven, and Jesus has to turn them down. They missed out, while this guy’s request gets answered, but the important part for today is this – Jesus heard him. He was heard.

You see Jesus was on his way to die. He probably had a sense he was going to die at the end of the week. With that kind of stress I wouldn’t be listening to anyone, but Jesus is. Jesus is. Spiritually significant conversations often happen when you least feel like having them. Jesus stops right away. He gives the man his full attention. He listens to his needs and he helps him.

What I wonder ‘what it would have been like to be that beggar?’ [Neighbour] At the start no one cares about you. You’re considered a good for nothing. You lie outside the city gate begging while your fellow citizens pass you by. You are the kind of person that other people keep apart from. The so-called beautiful people avoid you. You are definitely not a celebrity or A-list material, yet on this day, this one day, you cry out for attention, and someone hears you. Someone finally hears you. They pay attention to you. For the first time in ages you seem to matter, and they say “Come over here and tell me about your needs.” Someone once said that talking with Jesus is like having the mighty Amazon River of God’s love come down all to water just one daisy. The man (not the beggar) is seen. He is heard. He is appreciated, and he is helped. On top of that 2,000 years later those crazy Christians still remember His name! No wonder he wound up following Jesus!!

Jesus listened well and it was spiritually significant for Bartimaeus. All these years later there are still Bart’s who long for you and I to listen to them like Jesus did, so how do we do it? They look a lot like your neighbour, the girl at the bus stop, the man in the café, your workmate and your grandfather, so how do you and I actively listen? How do we listen to them well? Here are five quick suggestions on how to listen:

### 1. The first is Pay Attention.

Stop still. If someone wants to talk to you act like you are not in a hurry, even if you are. The key is to give the person speaking your undivided attention, and acknowledge that you have heard them. The length of time itself is not important. It’s your attitude that is!

One of the masters of this is a guy called President Clinton. Any of you heard of him? Whenever President Clinton stops to talk to someone he acts like they were the only person in the crowd. He ignores all side conversations. He looks at the speaker directly. He focuses in on the person so that it’s as if no one else is there. A little like what Jesus did for Bartimaeus. He stops. He has Bartimaeus brought to him. He focuses in on him alone.

In some circles this is known as the ‘Royal Treatment.’ We often recommend that couples do this for each other –there’s a tip for you Anaru and Julia.

When was the last time you gave someone the royal treatment and paid attention?

### 2. Secondly show That You're Listening. Have you ever thought of that? We might be listening intently to someone, but they might be completely unaware of it from our actions. What are some of the ways we can look interested when listening to someone? [Ask].

Right! We use our body language and gestures to show that we are listening. We can nod occasionally. We can smile and use other facial expressions. Have you ever noticed how people lean forward or tilt their head on one side if they are really listening? You can also encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like “Mmmm” and “uh huh.” Try it. It works!

### 3. It’s also helpful to Provide Feedback

This is one of my favourite cartoons at the moment! [Handing soap to a drowning person]. What’s going on? I think it’s pretty clear that what we have is a major miscommunication! (Although it could be deliberate!) And this can so easily happen when we are talking with someone. Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we actually hear. So as a listener we occasionally need to reflect back what is being said and ask **questions** -a bit like Jesus did. He clarified by asking, “What do you want me to do?”

You can reflect on what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is," and "Sounds like you are saying such and such." These are great ways of reflecting back. Or you can ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say….?" "Is this what you mean?" Or you can summarize the speaker's comments periodically. “Ah, so you are saying….” Just this week in a role play in a workshop I was in someone used these ways of giving feedback and it was amazing how much it encouraged the other person to open up and to share even more important things. Why don’t you give it a go sometime?

### 4. Another key skill though is Don’t Interrupt. How many of you enjoy being interrupted in a conversation? [Response] So why do we do it to others? They don’t like it either! Interrupting is a waste of time because it frustrates the speaker and it limits what they are trying to say. We won’t hear it all!

I think that one of the problems here is that most of us like to think ahead. I heard a fact this week recently that humans speak at 500 words a minute, but we think at 3,000. So after 1 minute you have thought 2,500 words further than the other person has explained. It is just so tempting at times to jump ahead and to make assumptions or even to prepare what you are going to say when they are quiet for just a moment. Don’t! Don’t try and think ahead. Instead allow the speaker to finish each point before asking your questions. And don't try to interrupt them with counter arguments either. Just let the conversation flow.

### 5. And then Respond Appropriately

I don’t need to say too much about this. You are giving someone the gift of listening. It maybe that after listening to them, you need to respond in some way. -Like Jesus did when he healed Bartimaeus. Listening is the step to whatever needs to happen next.

**C. Anyway the main point of my message is this. We need to remember that listening is extremely important.** It’s essential for people’s emotional and spiritual health, and it has been modelled for us by Jesus in so many different ways.

1. The thing is that listening brings hope. Kathleen Fischer says, “When I listen to other women and they listen to me we get such tremendous hope from listening to each other’s stories.”

2. Listening helps us to know that we are important and noticed. As one person said, “When someone truly listens to me, my spirit seems to expand with joy within me.”

3. Listening overcomes loneliness and isolation. Helen Keller was offered the choice of being blind or deaf, she said she would rather be blind, because she needed to hear people’s voices and communicate that way. It helps the speaker to come in from the outside.

4. And it can in fact change a person’s perspective. One conversation can change a person’s life forever!

5. And listening can also help people to begin to understand where God is in their life and how they might need to engage with Him. Genuine listening can lead to genuine faith conversations even with complete strangers.

Listening is so important for the emotional and spiritual health of the people we will meet this week -and so what I want us all to do this week is to concentrate upon our listening. Let’s use this week to become active listeners, because these skills I’ve just mentioned need practise. They don’t just appear overnight when you pray. They improve as we use them. They become a part of who we are as we put them into use!

So can I make a suggestion for our persona growth and this is a one that you can all do. Read chapter 5 in Godspace this week. And make a real effort to really listen to 1-2 strangers that you meet during thes week. Remember that every good (everyday) conversation begins with good listening.

Would you join me together in prayer?

Lord God, I pray that in all circumstances I will be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Grant me opportunities this week where I may actively listen to another and so hear the sound of what is on people’s hearts. Cause me to be attentive, open, positive and affirming. Help me to hold on tightly to my tongue. Mould me into a better listener this week Father as I rely upon you. In Jesus name. Amen.