

Pastor T.C. Arnold
8th Sunday after Trinity
Jeremiah 23:16
August 6th, 2017

There is an article in a recent edition of Christianity Today called “A Lesson in Listening.” The point of the article is to be mindful that listening is the very best way to share the love of Jesus. That sounds counter intuitive, but in reality it is not. Tim Keller a former pastor of a large congregation in the heart of New York City said, “We could do a far better job of patiently listening and we should not talk until we can represent the skeptic’s viewpoint with empathy so that a skeptic friend says, ‘Yes, that is my hang up; I couldn’t have put it better myself.’ Only then should we try to recommend the Christian faith to them.” Further helpful hints for talking to our non-Christian friends include things like, make it your goal to understand the person and not change their mind. Take genuine interest in why someone believes the way they believe. Judge not and empathize lots.

This is sage advice for anyone who wants to have a relationship with another person. And, I contend, you will never be able to argue a person into the Christian faith. They won’t care what you know until first you show them that you care about them. So, listen, beloved in the Lord. That advice is not only for sharing the Christian faith, it’s also for husbands and wives, sons and daughters, coworkers and neighbors.

However, it sounds like Jeremiah is giving us the opposite advice in the Old Testament text for today. Jeremiah says in verse sixteen, “*Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.*” Wait a minute – we are taught to listen first but Jeremiah tells me to “not listen.” When I’m at home and focused on the game on the television and Andrea says something and I don’t even hear a word she is saying, she will tell me to “listen.” When I was a kid and my parents gave me a job to do but I was not real attentive to their instructions – and I did the job wrong – they would get angry with me – because I was not listening. When the kids in confirmation class are muttering to their friends sitting next to them I tell them to “listen.” We are supposed to listen. But Jeremiah says, “Do NOT listen...”

As we grow older and wiser the situation we are in may tell us what we should do. Sometimes, we still need to be taught... we need guidance and understanding. So, when we go to the Scriptures, it should be clear. It’s God’s Word, for crying out loud, and it will give us all the answers. But I keep on hearing conflicting reports from the Word of God (so it seems). I thought I was told to listen – but Jeremiah says, “*Do not listen.*”

That’s not what James says in chapter one, “*My dear brothers, take note of this; everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...*” The great prophet Moses said, “*You must listen to everything the prophet tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off...*” (Duet. 18). The wisdom of the Proverbs says, “*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice*” (Prov. 12:15). And Jesus says in John chapter ten, “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me.*” Unless I’m mistaken, the Bible tells us to listen.

This could “seem” confusing. But when we take into account the context of what Jeremiah is writing about we understand right away that he is imploring us to not listen to “false prophets” who fill our heads with vain hopes and untruths from their own minds. So it does make sense. Sometimes we really are to listen. And then other times, when my mom would say, “Don’t listen to him” or “don’t pay any attention to them.” She was right. For my own good I am supposed to listen to what is good for me and not listen to what can harm me, that is, hear it but do not take it to heart as your own.

First and foremost we must NOT LISTEN to the false prophets. They come in many different shapes and sizes. What I mean is that sometimes they can be very different from us – the way they dress, the way they talk and act. And sometimes we see that they are just like us in so many ways. These are the wolves in sheep’s clothing. These are the most dangerous. We are taught time and time again that if a teacher about God does not talk about Jesus as the very center of our life today and forever in heaven, there might be a

problem. A big problem. But what about those who do talk about Jesus but then also try to import false ideas that seem reasonable but aren't exactly what the Bible say? This is exactly where so many people go wrong. They listen to the truth and ignore that which is contrary to what the Bible teaches. These are the most dangerous among us. Recognizing those who renounce Jesus and staying away from them is not difficult. We get fooled by those who talk about Jesus, but in an inadequate or non-Biblical way. This is why the prophet Jeremiah says, "Don't listen to those kinds of prophets."

Secondly, with all of this "not listening" Jeremiah would warn us through these words to stay away from paying attention to the words of the world. Jeremiah says, ..."*who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?*" Baal worship was such a worldly religion. It fed on the lusts of man's heart – centered on what satisfies our desires rather than that of God and others. It's religion of the world. And it still exists today.

In so many things we do we continue to worship Baal, if you will, by listening to the world. The world accepts many different trends and situations that the Lord does not. Lifestyle is, according to the world, a personal choice. What we do with our bodies, we have been taught by the world, is my business. There are so many people living together today without the benefit of marriage and we are told, by the world, this is okay. Times have changed, we hear. Society accepts it so therefore the church and God must too. We cannot listen to these false prophets.

Godly lifestyle is a gift from the Lord. It cannot be trumped by the idea of personal choice. It's not your body and you can't do whatever you want with it – you and I belong to our Lord. We are temples of the Holy Spirit and called to be examples of Christ Jesus in all we do and say. And the Lord has not changed his view on adultery either. Don't listen to the world.

If we listen to others who lead us astray, if we listen to the world when its ideas of a moral standard changes, then we are more prone to listen to ourselves. And that is not always a good idea either. Sometimes we don't like to do what our Lord wants us to do. We would rather do it our way – no matter how much it will hurt ourselves and others around us. In this way, we can't listen to ourselves either.

But do listen – not to the world, the false prophets, and our sinful desires, but to God's Word. Listen when you hear it spoken. Listen to yourself as you read His Word and live it. And sometimes – in our world – when we least expect it, someone actually does a Christ-like act and doesn't have a selfish intent. Listen when God speaks in this way. Listen to Jesus.

If you listen close enough you will hear it. You will hear His suffering on the cross with screams of agony. You will hear the weeping and the crying. You will hear the people call out to our Savior. But then, you will also hear the shouts of acclamation of our Savior living again. You will hear Mary Magdalene. You will hear the disciples as they see their Savior alive – risen from the dead. You will hear Easter. Listen as our Lord calls you out of the darkness into His marvelous light. Listen to the Words of your Savior. He lives and He lives for you. Listen to His great gifts because this is what you have today that never changes. The message of false prophets change – the message of the world changes – the feelings within ourselves even change. But our Lord doesn't. So where are you going to go? Go to the Lord and His truth. Listen to Him and none other

I used to think if only people would listen to me, they would know Jesus and be saved. We do listen first... sometimes we listen and distinguish between wrong and right. Then we share what is right at the right time. But we have to know what is right first. We know that through the Word of God. Here is our source. Hear our Jesus says to us, "*I know my sheep and they listen to my voice*" we can be confident that in Christ we are one of those sheep that belong to our Lord. What a joy it is to listen to the right words – to life. Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.