

# “Building a Strong Family of God: Listen to God and Others”

October 24, 2021

*Are you listening to me? Do you hear me?* I’ve probably said or heard both of those questions this week. Listening and hearing seem to be at a premium even as we continue to talk about the need for real connection that was already present even before a global pandemic, but now that need seems even more desperate.

And we need to talk about the difference between listening and hearing. I hear you, but am I listening to you? I know you’re saying something, but am I receiving it? Hearing is the physical act of receiving and decoding sounds, but listening requires more - like paying attention, pondering, and seeking to understand someone. Listening is a matter of intent and willingness. It doesn’t mean that we have to agree, but it does mean that we offer our time and attention. And it matters in our relationship with God and with others. It’s a way we love one another.

**SLIDE:** *Love begins with listening.* - Mr. Rogers

Dr. Jennifer Browne is a clergy colleague who wrote a reflection on our conference website earlier this year. She told the story of how much she appreciates her hair stylist who does a good job on her hair, but who also listens to her. When she complimented her stylist on remembering details about her family, the stylist said, “Actually, I don’t think it has to do with memory. I think it has to do with listening well.”

We know what a gift listening can be - when someone really listens to us without interrupting or changing the subject or cutting us off. Most of us yearn for a good listener, and many of us aren’t very good at it - at least not without some real intention and real attention. We really have to work at it to do it well. **SLIDE:** Stephen Covey says, *The biggest communication problem is that we do not listen to understand; we listen to reply.* Many of us are already thinking about our response to someone while they’re talking to us!

We spent some time in the Book of James earlier this fall, and today we go back to the first chapter. The writer’s advice isn’t new. Proverbs is filled with a lot of advice about listening: *Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.* But listening is key, according to James - *be quick to listen, slow to speak.* For some of us, the challenge begins there. We are quick to speak and slow to listen - and sometimes it gets us into trouble.

We’re tempted to fill the silence with something - anything - because it’s too hard for some of us to sit in silence - to sit with silence. Jefferson Bethke says, “Silence is the eerie monster that a lot of us try to avoid. We run from silence because we’re scared of its power. Silence can make us face our true selves. It’s when we begin to ask

the deep questions.” And he adds, “When we cut out silence, we cut out the margin for God to speak.” I wonder if that’s why Psalm 46 resonates so powerfully: *Be still and know that I am God.*

If we’re in a conversation, some of us may want to “fix” a problem that someone is sharing. But, many times, there’s no “fix” to it - and that’s not really the need. Sometimes we just want someone to listen to us. Sometimes we just need to speak out of our hearts because it’s a way to let go and unburden ourselves. We’re called to bear one another’s burden, and that means listening.

And some would say that being heard and being loved are the same thing. Maybe that goes along with Mister Rogers’ word - that *love begins with listening*. If we believe that part of being loved is being heard, what are you and I telling one another when we don’t listen? Certainly, listening well helps us to build a strong family because we grow in trust and care. It matters with God and with others.

Jesus offers this word about listening after he identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep. He follows up with a word about the sheep - they listen to his voice. There’s a clear connection between listening and relationship. We can’t truly be connected to him without listening to him.

He is the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep. The images of Jesus usually show him carrying a sheep in his arms or holding the sheep around his neck. The focus is on the care and comfort and protection that he offers. The Good Shepherd is more than a title; it’s more than a sentimental feeling. This is about who Jesus is and who we are - and how we’re called to listen for his voice.

In a time when so many voices can drown out Jesus’ voice, it’s more important than ever to be clear about what Jesus says and what he doesn’t say. Spending time with Scripture helps us to know that. Shepherd and sheep were familiar images for those around Jesus, and they went back into Hebrew Scriptures, too. Moses and David were shepherds who became leaders among the people.

In the Book of Ezekiel, God speaks about shepherds – leaders – who only care for themselves and disregard the needs of others. Not all shepherds are good, so it matters that Jesus calls himself the “Good Shepherd.” With careless shepherds, the flock scatters and is in danger. So, the image of shepherd relates to leadership. And a Good Shepherd protects the sheep and offers security, along with refreshment and pasture.

We don’t tend to see shepherds in the fields, but a colleague shared a story of a family member who raises sheep. What stood out to her was the care and concern that he showed for the sheep, especially in the season when lambs were born. The shepherd sacrificed sleep to stay with the sheep until the mothers delivered and until he knew that the newborn lambs were healthy, and these sheep allowed him to be with them as

they delivered the lambs. She used words like tireless devotion and complete trust - connection and relationship.

She said that the sheep knew his voice. The Good Shepherd is invested in the lives of the sheep. The sheep trust the shepherd because he can be trusted. They listen because they know him. He is with them. He is concerned for the good of the flock. He has authority because he invests himself in their lives, offering protection and correction. That's where listening becomes especially important.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us to follow him. Certainly, we stray away. We get off course. We wander from the safety of community. And we need protection from the power of temptation that can destroy our relationships. We need correction – we need to be brought back when we wander. And it means to be brought back into community with others who are part of the flock. We need each other; we follow Jesus together. Still today, we need people around us who can help us to listen. So many times, we say, “Listen, God, because we’re talking to you.” We probably don’t come to God with saying, “Speak, God, because we’re listening to you” often enough.

God wants us to be stronger together for our spiritual growth - and for our witness to the world. From a faith perspective, we have to be disciples to make disciples. We have to give Jesus time – even quieting ourselves enough to listen to him – so that we can do what he calls us to do. The centering exercise we started with is a powerful reminder that we don’t tend to “be still” very well or very much. Settling ourselves into God’s presence - intentionally - is important so that we can listen well. How often do we take time - even just 5 minutes - to sit and listen to the Holy Spirit?

God is speaking, but we don’t always listen well. I wonder if we’re unsure about what we might hear from God if we took time to “be still.” How might we be challenged, convicted, and even comforted? I read a post this week that said, *It’s hard to hear God’s voice when you’ve already decided what you want God to say.* That was somewhat convicting to me, and maybe you’ve found yourself pretty sure you know God’s take on any given situation. And yet, there’s a word from Psalm 46: *Be still...and know that I am God.*

To whom do we give our time and attention? Many of us probably give more time to politicians, commentators, celebrities, or YouTubers than we do to Jesus. We don’t take time to read Jesus’ word to us - life giving, living, active, with something to say to us.

My challenge to us this week is to intentionally read Scripture. If you already have a devotional practice, keep it up. If you don’t, every day is a good day to start. And it’s a way that we practice listening. What if we took a few minutes to center our hearts as best we can – at least remembering that God is with us? If we take a moment and get

quiet, what might we be able to hear? **SLIDE:** Dalai Lama quote - *When you talk, you are only repeating something you already know. But if you listen you may learn something new.*

Listening to God and to others - opening ourselves to learn and understand one another more fully - and see God's work in all of us. Just like investing our time in small groups and opportunities to grow closer to each other, listening well can build our relationships within the Body of Christ, which then reflects God's love among us and out into the world.

It might be difficult to realize that sometimes all we can do is listen, but listening is sometimes enough. I hope we can all think of a time when listening has been a gift to us. It's something we can offer to each other.

As we're considering our faith commitments, I pray we take time to listen to God - for how God is calling us to commit to God's work. I pray we do the intentional work of listening to others - really listening - and offering that as a gift of God. How can we pay closer attention to our listening - not being ready to respond or give advice or fix something - but simply to listen to God and to each other?

May we be quick to listen, slow to speak, and always listening for and following Jesus, our Good Shepherd. May we listen for his voice and follow him.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.