

Sermon Series: Sharing the Love of God
“Listening”

Last Sunday at Annual Conference in Cincinnati
The preacher Leonard Sweet chided
Congregations and denominations

For the time and energy spent
In producing Vision and Mission Statements
When Jesus already gave us one.

Matthew 29:19
Go and make disciples of all nations

It’s ironic that his comment came on the heels
Of the delegate body’s decision on Saturday

To set aside all business for AC 2019
To develop a new vision for the church.

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I tend to agree with Sweet.

The church has spent a lot of time navel gazing
Trying to find themselves

Rather than moving forward
With the clear understanding
Christ’s mandate for the church
Is to share God’s love in word and deed
Individually and as a church.

The church has a mission!

I quote from James Davison Hunter
Professor of sociology at UVA.

He wrote this great but difficult book entitled
To Change the World.

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Hunter is a follower of Jesus.

He writes:

First, for the Christian, evangelism is central to the identity and purpose in the world. To share the Gospel is to share the gift of life; the making of disciples is foundational to the Christian faith.

I know in some circles

The word evangelism has negative connotations.

I get that!

We are not to discuss religion much less promote it!

It's okay to express our faith with acts of kindness

Everybody appreciates that!

But if we bring up why we feel called to do such things

That our Christian faith prompts us to love neighbor

We're accused of proselytizing!

Current social norms consider evangelism inappropriate

Presumptuous, and arrogant . . .

We are to live and let live.

However, the NT's mandate is very clear . . .

We are to share our faith in word and deed.

The argument is not whether you should or shouldn't.

But how might we be most effective

In sharing the love of God.

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In an article from Christianity Today entitled

A Lesson in Listening:

*Why the best witnesses use their ears first
And their mouths later*

Christine Herman writes that when Tim Keller
Pastor of the Redeemer Church in NYC
Announced his retirement

He shared thoughts on how to better connect with skeptics:

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.

Has it ever occurred to us
That the most effective way to share God's love
Is by listening?

It seems counter-productive.

A good friend and fellow minister in Nigeria
Toma Raginjia spoke of his relationships to Muslims.

He states that before ever engaging
In conversations relating to faith

He gains the person's trust . . .
If not, the conversation quickly becomes volatile.

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And frankly I don't know of anyone
Who has argued someone into the kingdom of God.

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With religious discussions
Like their political counterparts

It's nigh impossible to have a civil conversation any longer.

We have learned not to bring up hot-button topics
Such as politics, religion, or sex.

From Face Book to family reunions
Our disagreements regularly turn into shouting matches
Where no one is listening and everyone is talking.

When it comes to sharing the love of God
There is a better way.
If we have any hope in bridging divisions
Between family members, churches, and communities

If we have any hope in fulfilling the mandate
To be witnesses for Jesus to all nations

Then the first thing we must learn . . .
Is how to have better conversations.

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Before entering into a discussion surrounding faith
It is important to know the basics of good conversation.

Because there is nothing worse
Than to hear someone with evangelistic zeal

Coming off as a Mr-know-it-all
With all the answers to life's complex problems

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Who can't wait to hit you over the head with Jesus Christ!

It is rude and disrespectful.

The key to sharing the love of God
Is in building trusting relationships.

Remember the primary purpose of friendships
Is not to convert someone to your way of thinking
But to make a friend.

If there's a transformation to be had
Let God do it . . .
God is quite capable of that!
Your job is to make and be a friend.

Trusting friendships don't have hidden agendas.

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There are some “do's” and “don'ts” in relationship building.

The first “do” in friendship building is be a good listener.

James writes
Be quick to listen
Slow to speak
Slow to get angry.

James' message is relevant for today.

A good listener is hard to find.

It seems conversations amount to taking turns talking.

Good listening is not easy.

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It takes energy, discipline, and intentionality.

Let’s face it, it’s a whole lot easier to express your opinion
Pay no attention to what the other person is saying
And be done with it.

But by listening
You offer a trusting environment for conversation.

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The second “do” in the art of friendship building
Is to ask a question that provokes a weightier answer.

A good question invites deeper dialog.

Tailor the discussion to fit the context.

Follow in the direction the person is heading.

There may be a reason the conversation is heading that way.

In other words, don’t try and control the conversation.

It will easily be discerned you have an agenda.

If you are serious and really want to share the love of God
Your basic concern is the well-being
Of the person you are engaged with.

Questions obviously help you to get to know the other.

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Another “do” in conversation is to let silence be silence.

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A thought-filled silence is not a bad thing.

In good conversation

You don't have to fill the silence!

If in silence you sense a time to speak . . . speak.

But, the 4th “do” in conversation is

Make sure you think before you speak.

Because if, as you are speaking

The listener's eye begin to glaze over

No matter how important

You think what you are saying is . . .

You're just sucking up the air in the room.

If you think before you speak

It might just give God a chance

To place on your lips

Something worthy of hearing.

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Okay. Now about some “don'ts” in conversation.

Don't be a conversational narcissist.

A conversational narcissist is someone

Who only talks about themselves.

If you dominate the conversation . . . stop!

Few people want to hear it!

If the person you are engaged in conversation with

Is the conversational narcissist

May God have mercy . . . but be patient.

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Most conversational narcissists are hurting people.

In time, with patience

The brokenness can surface and healing may occur.

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The 2nd “don’t” is not to interrupt someone.

A 1954 magazine article from *Esquire Etiquette*

Describes two forms of interruption:

“The obvious one, interrupting the speaker in mid-sentence, is easy to avoid: just wait until the other has stopped talking before you start. (And don’t ever say, “Have you finished?” You might as well say right out that he’s a windy numskull and you thought he’d never run down.)

The other kind of interruption, equally culpable, is often prefaced by “That reminds me...” or “By the way.” Such phrases usually signal a digression or irrelevancy. When you interrupt another’s train of thought, or send a discussion off into a tangent, you indicate that you are either stupid or rude, either unable or unwilling to stick with the speaker’s point.

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The 3rd “don’t” in good conversation

Is not to dig too deeply too soon.

We must respect the privacy of others.

If the one you’re talking to

Shies away from a sensitive subject . . .

Leave it alone . . .

Don’t push it!

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And finally, the last “don’t” in good conversation
And I shouldn’t have to say this . . .
Put away the electronics!

There is nothing worse than being in a conversation
Only for you to answer a phone call.

It shows insensitivity and states clearly
That whoever is on the other line
Is far more important than this conversation.

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To effectively share the love of God
We are to establish relationships with people
Lasting and meaningful friendships.

And hear me . . . this is not JUST the attempt
To convert someone to the Christian faith . . .

In a mutual friendship . . .
There will be mutual value.

You will gain as much as you give
In such friendships.

God will enrich both of your lives.

We must remember
If God is present
Then God can and will
Lead and guide a sincere conversation.

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Christians promoting unity among fellow Christians
Christians seeking to be an influence in the world
Christians helping to lead people to Christ

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Need to do a lot less talking and a lot more listening.

The good news of Jesus Christ will only touch someone
When it meets the person in their greatest need.

That doesn't happen when you're doing all the talking.

It takes a relationship.

James says be a good listener.

Being a good listener conveys love
And ultimately that is the work of the evangelist . . .
Conveying love.

~~

We, Brethren, have done well
In proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in deed.

We're awkward when it comes to proclaiming it in word.

Jesus seeks us to engage in both.

It's simple really
Be a friend and offer a listening ear
God is quite capable of doing the rest.