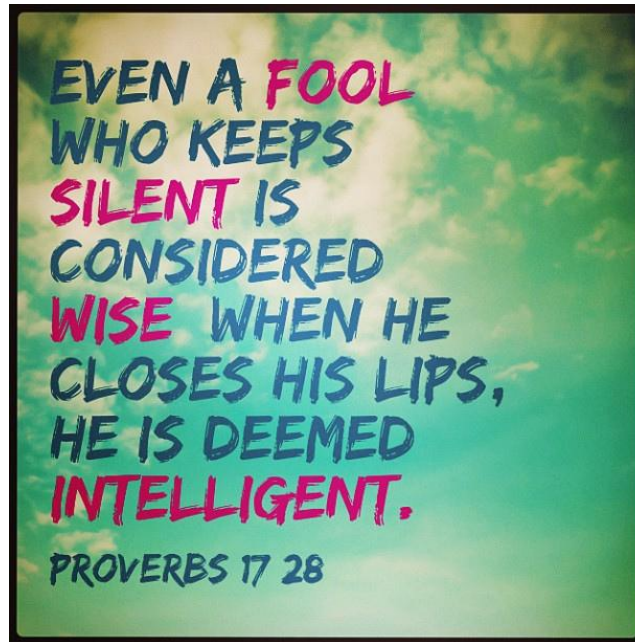


Sunday, 18 September 2016

[Christian Caregiving 2- Listening](#)



[Prov 17:27-28; Ps 81; James 1:19-27; Mark 4:1-9](#)

Today we are continuing our sermon series on Christian Caregiving. We started with the assumption that we are all called to be Christian Caregivers and that some have a particular gift for it. Last time we highlighted God's image of a healthy human being, which is a human being that is growing in Christ-likeness. We also said that this image of health is what we should keep in mind as we care for someone, because we want to have the same goal as God does for the person. If we recognize that God has a bigger goal for us, then we have to put our immediate discomfort into that broader picture and recognize that there might be a way that we can use our suffering towards that end. As we help people we can also feel free from the pressure to provide the person a 'quick fix' for

their problem because ultimately it is God's healing that is needed. We can also feel free from the need to be an expert because if a healthy person looks like Jesus then we are all in need of healing. ... So that is a summary of what we dealt with last time.

This week we will be looking at the topic of listening as a Christian Caregiver. Listening is a constant theme in the Bible. In our readings today we heard

“Whoever restrains his words has knowledge Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” (Prov 17:27-28).

In Psalm 81 God laments that His people don't listen-

“Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me! ... But my people did not listen to my voice ... Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!” (81:8, 11a, 13).

St. James gives direction saying,

“let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger... If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless” (James 1:19, 26).

Later in his letter St. James says,

“...the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. ... It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:5-7, *abbreviated*).

He advises his people to listen and then warns them of the dangers of speaking. And our Lord taught saying,

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9).

He taught knowing that having ears and actually hearing are two separate things. ... We could give many more examples- The importance of listening is emphasized over and over in the Bible and in the guidance of the saints.

So who are we listening to? In the Bible, the emphasis tends to be on listening to God and his revealed word in Scripture or through the prophets. It also speaks about listening to teachers, but it does talk about a general listening. For example, Proverbs 18:13 says,

“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.”

So to be a wise Biblical Christian we should be careful to cultivate an ability to listen carefully.

We want to learn to listen to God in prayer, through Scripture, as well as other ways. (If you want to know more about this there is a great book called *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard.) ... We are thinking primarily about hearing as caregivers this morning. And as we learn to do this more we will learn to listen to God in the midst of listening to someone who is in pain as well. For example, we might feel an unusual inner urge to ask a particular question. Sometimes this is the Holy Spirit nudging us in a particular direction. We shouldn't think that listening to another and listening to God are all that dissimilar. The disciplines that make us better listeners of God will also makes us better listeners of others. If we practice contemplative prayer, or the discipline of silence, then we will be better listeners to both God and others in our life.

Today we will look mainly at listening to a person we are caring

for. Some of the problems we have with listening can be alleviated when we learn to take the situation seriously. Caring for people in their pain is a holy place. Jesus says when we care for people in their needs that we have done it for him (Matt 25). There is a mysterious encounter with God when we enter into a person's pain, but we are often not aware of it. ...

It is important to also remember the mystery of the person you are listening to. This is a person created in God's image- a person Christ has died for. God desires eternal life for this person- a life where they will grow into a more and more glorious being reflecting Christ's image into creation. ... Sometimes when we don't listen well it is because we are dismissive of the person. We don't take them with the seriousness God takes them. I mentioned this last time, but as CS Lewis said,

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors” (The Weight of Glory).

We need to learn to think more about the mystery of the person we are with. Think about any person you know- even the most dull person. No number of words could ever sum that person up. No number of books could really help you grasp that person perfectly. There will always be something missing that we can't necessarily explain. The Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky said,

“There will always remain an ‘irrational residue’ which escapes analysis and which cannot be expressed in concepts; it is the

unknowable depth of things, that which constitutes their true, indefinable essence.” (in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*).

While there is this mystical side to people there is also a simplicity to human beings. For example, I once heard a very wise man say that all human motivation can be broken down into either an attempt to avoid pain, or to find happiness. All the complexity of human behavior, he believed, could be found in those two motivations. As caregivers, it can be helpful to listen for those two motivations in the person we are caring for.

There are some stumbling blocks to listening well that might be helpful to name. Some are practical. Like, making sure you schedule enough time to listen to the person well so you aren't glancing at your watch because you have a dentist appointment.

‘Noise’ can be a stumbling block. This can be external distractions like a TV, or being in a busy place. Or maybe we have hearing troubles and need a hearing aid. But, there are also inner distractions (or inner noise). This might be an attitude, a prejudice, a belief, etc., that is getting in the way of really listening. Say someone says something in passing about a political issue while they are describing an issue that is troubling them. The political issue really doesn't have anything to do with what's troubling them, but say you care deeply about the issue they mentioned. Your mind might fixate on that and create a kind of ‘internal noise’ that makes it difficult to listen. This inner noise can cause us to obsess about a topic that really isn't that important, or it can cause us to avoid certain issues, or change the subject, or it can make us feel defensive. The best

way to deal with inner noise is just being aware that it is there. It is when we are not aware of it that it tends to catch us. Michael Nichols, who wrote *The Lost Art of Listening*, wrote “genuine listening means suspending memory, desire, and judgment- and, for a few moments at least, existing for the other person” (p64).

Jesus says,
“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, when there is the log in your own eye?” (Matt 7:1-4).

When we are listening it is very important to withhold judgement, especially when we haven't heard the full context of what they are trying to tell us.

Another stumbling block can be interruptions. We might interrupt the person we are listening to. We might have a “profound insight” that just can't wait, and our internal pressure is building until we feel we just have to say it. Sometimes we finish a person's sentences (I'm preaching to myself here). We might be dominating the conversation to alleviate our own anxiety and feed our own need for control. Our own discomfort might cause us to change the topic. In general we should try to talk less. If we are talking more than the person we are listening to then we are probably speaking out of our own internal anxiety or need to control.

To listen well it is important to make sure you can actually hear

the person, then to really attend to what they are saying by attempting to understand and asking clarifying questions. Listen to what is important- meaning and emotion. It's also important to try to put yourself in their place. Imagine going through what they are going through, or at least try to see things from their point of view.

It is important to also listen with more than just our ears. Our attention will often be where our eyes are. So not only is it important in terms of focusing our attention, but we need to also listen with our eyes by noticing the person's body language. What is not being said with their voice, might be being said with their body. They might fidget a lot when they talk about a certain topic, or they might make less eye contact. This is why email and texting can be so difficult when dealing with someone who is hurting. I remember texting a friend and I thought we were having a theoretical philosophical conversation, but little did I know that for about the hour we were texting back and forth she was in tears. This was not a theoretical philosophical topic for her. In a text conversation you lose access to body language, which often says more than a person's words.

It is also important to pay attention to the kinds of things we say. We might repeat back or sum up what someone is saying to make sure we understand. We might affirm them or encourage them. We can also ask questions. We want to especially ask open-ended questions. An open-ended question is one that you can't answer with a "yes" or a "no". For example, you might ask, "how did you feel when that happened to you?" Or, you might just ask them to tell you more. It is important to encourage people to express how they are feeling because

sometimes people feel like they don't want to bother you with how they are feeling, or they feel like they are being selfish by talking about themselves. But, it is important that we all have safe places to talk about these things. ... If we are in a trusting relationship we might ask something like, "how are you and God doing?" Or, when they express something that has happened to them we might ask, "Do you see any purpose in what is happening?" We also have to recognize that as we get close to real raw emotion that anxiety will increase and we might have to be careful about not avoiding it, or notice when the other person attempts to avoid it. It doesn't mean we should hold their feet to the fire, but we might say, "I noticed to changed the subject when this topic came up. Would you rather not talk about it?"

Listening to a person's soul means to listen for meaning and purpose. Listening as a Christian Caregiver doesn't always mean listening for churchy words. We listen for what matters deep down. We might hear practical physical needs, emotional needs, mental needs, or social needs, but hovering over all of it and tying it all together are the spiritual needs. Spirituality is the integrating holistic element that ties a person's life together and helps them live tomorrow. Spirituality is concerned with questions like, what is the meaning of life? Why am I here? Why is this happening to me? What does God think of me? What is right and wrong in this situation? Why does God allow suffering? These question can make people uncomfortable. They aren't easy to talk about and they can be hard to listen to people talk about too. We don't live in a society that is all that comfortable with these questions. We are more likely to talk about the weather, or the hockey game, or something in the

news, than to talk about some of these deep issues. As Christians, it is important that we are safe people to talk about these things with. People need to be able to trust us that we won't reject them or shut down the conversation when it disagrees with our values or gets too personal. They need to trust that we won't flip to a different topic or crack a joke when they share a deep hurt with us that makes us uncomfortable. They need to trust that we are going to value the depth and complexity of what they are dealing with and aren't going to respond with a cliché or some other "know-it-all" shallow canned answer to try to fix their problem. Clichés often contain truth, but they can also be shallow and can shut down a conversation. Saying "all you need is faith", or "don't worry, God loves you" doesn't begin to value a person's pain. Jesus never responded to a person's pain with a cliché. It would be better to not say anything or to encourage them to elaborate.

David Augsburger, who writes books about pastoral counselling, once said,

"Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."

That is the kind of listening we are looking for. To listen this way the author Parker Palmer writes we have to be "governed by that simple but countercultural rule, 'No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.'"

He assumes people can be listened into understanding their own issues, and when they are given space to be deeply listened to the Holy Spirit often becomes their own inner Counselor-convicting them and correcting them where needed- Often without us saying a word. He says,

“the best service I can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher”.

May God grant us the gift of profound listening as we care for others. AMEN