**How to BLESS Your Neighbor – Week 3 – Listen**

**Scripture:** Luke 18:35-43

**Message Big Idea:** In order to BLESS our neighbor, Jesus invites us to listen.

**Introduction Mondegreen**

Need audio clips. Seems long…is it OK?

We all know someone… or *are* someone…who has a special knack for loudly singing the wrong lyric to a song. In fact, raise your hand if you are that person. Don’t lie, Jesus sees you… Alright, now point to the person in this room that is this person but doesn’t know it. There you are. It’s okay, we’re here for you.

Probably the most famous example of a commonly misunderstood song lyric is from this famous Jimi Hendrix song…finish the song with me *(Play “’Scuse me while I –(cut) ---- pause to let people finish. Then play the end of the phrase “Kiss the sky”)*

Ok, what did you hear? *(Get responses)* Now, most of you know that the correct answer is “Scuse me while I kiss the sky!” But the commonly misheard lyric is “Scuse me while I kiss this guy!” That’s a very different song now, isn’t it?

~~Or How about this famous example from the band Toto.~~ *~~(Play “There’s nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do.”)~~*

~~What did you hear? Some heard “There’s nothing that a hundred men could ever do.” But who heard “There’s nothing that a hundred men on mars could ever do?” If you said the second one …please raise your hand for public shaming. Just Kidding!~~

If you’re not listening closely…certain songs can be very confusing. But this phenomenon doesn’t just happen with song lyrics. It probably most often happens with words in regular conversation. This phenomenon is referred to as a **Mondegreen**. Dictionary definition. A Mondegreen is a “misheard word or phrase that makes sense in your head, but is, in fact, entirely incorrect.”

Here’s the story behind this word. The term Mondegreen was coined by writer Sylvia Wright. Legend has it that she was sharing the meaning of one of her favorite Scottish love songs with a group of people when she made a troubling discovery… She was talking about the deep meaning of the Scottish Ballad “The Bonnie Earl of Moray.” And she *thought* the song concluded with this tragically romantic picture saying,

**“They have slain the Earl o’ Moray, and Lady Mondegreen.”**

However, much to the embarrassment of this literary and cultural scholar…the class informed her that the actual lyric was,

**“They have slain the Earl o’ Moray, and laid him on the green.”**

Awkward. Nothing like telling a room full of people about how meaningful this “love” song was to you only to discover that you have been wrong your whole life!

Or have you ever had the experience of hearing someone talk and not understanding the noises that came out of their mouth? It’s such a strange feeling isn’t it! I typically just nod politely and hope they had just asked me a yes or no question. I think all of us can probably think of several of our own Mondegreen moments! And as it turns out there is actually a physiological and psychological reasons for why it is so easy to mis-hear words and song lyrics.

In short, hearing is a two-step process.

First, there is the physics of a sound wave making its way through your ear and into the auditory cortex of that grey blob in your head…this is the physical process of hearing.

But then there is a whole second part that is just as important as the first. This is the part where your brain takes the noise and gives it meaning and significance. For example, when you hear something and say, “That is a dog barking” or “That is a fire alarm”

Listening. Really listening and understanding is a critical expression of love. In fact, author David W. Augsburger put it this way:

**“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable.” ― David W. Augsburger**

Sometimes, when it comes to really listening to the people around us, our main issue isn’t that we aren’t hearing…maybe we just aren’t paying enough attention to actually *listen*.

**Series Intro:**

Over the last two weeks we’ve been in a series called *(series graphic)* “How to BLESS Your Neighbor” which is all about our mission to help people find their way back to God! Helping people find their way back to God is not just a mission statement to memorize. It’s not just the mission statement of our church. It’s YOUR mission. It’s MY mission. It’s OUR mission!

Too often, though, we are people that “hope” people find their way back to God instead of being people who “help” people find their way back to God. So, during this series we want to equip and challenge one another to be people who actually “help” others.

So, how do we carry this mission out? *(BLESS graphic)* Through the years we have found that the best way to live out this mission in our community is to be a BLESSing. In fact, we often say that we are BLESSed *to be* a BLESSing. Now, around here BLESS is an acronym that stands for five missional practices that are central to living out the Jesus mission.

*(Genesis 12:1-3)* Just like God told Abraham in Genesis 12 every single one of us has been blessed to be a blessing to others. So the question we need to wrestle with is this: who are the people or where are the places you’ve been called to BLESS? Last week we challenged you to Begin with Prayer by identifying those people and places you have been called to BLESS. And today we’re going to talk about the second practice: Listening.

**Jesus as a Listener**

Now, I’m sure I don’t have to convince you that we live in a world where hardly anybody *really* listens. Most people are more interested in what *they* have to say than listening to someone else. There’s a saying that goes like this: Who said this? **“The opposite of listening is not speaking, it’s waiting to speak.”** Isn’t that true? That even when we’re not talking, a lot of times we’re thinking about what the other person is saying. We’re thinking about what we’re gonna say. I struggle with this. Too many times I’m not really listening closely to people. I’m just cueing up what I’m gonna say next.

Ok, so moment of truth - show of hands, how many of you have ever been in a conversation where it felt like the other person was there but not really there? I can sense some glaring going on… How many of us have *been* that person?

We have all been part of conversations where the other person was saying “uh-huh,” but we knew they were not really listening to anything that we were saying. But if we want to discover and embrace our mission, we have to become very intentional about listening. Listening is so crucial in the Jesus Mission.

And Jesus modeled this for us in incredible ways. Motivated by his love for everyone he came into contact with we see Jesus, not just performing great miracles or teaching mind blowing and world changing truths, but also taking the time again and again to show love in the most practical and simple way…He listened.

*(Luke 18:35-43; highlight verse 40)* In Luke 18 Jesus hears the sounds of a blind beggar calling out on the side of the road but he doesn’t just continue on with His business like everyone else… He stops, crouches down low, asks a question, and *actually listens* to the man…It’s not until after he listens to him that He blesses the man by healing him. Jesus was willing to take the time to listen and pay attention to the people that no one else seemed to care for, the one every else overlooked.

Too much on screen

*(John 5:1-15)* Again in John 5 Jesus is walking by a small pool of water outside of a city gate, surrounded by a swirl of noise and humanity, but He notices a man lying there by the edge of the water. And what does Jesus do? *(Highlight verse 6)* He stops, He asks the man a question and he listens so he knows how to bless the man rather than just making an assumption about what the man needs. Jesus listens.

Are you starting so see a pattern here?

Then again in the very next chapter, John 6 Jesus sends out the 12 disciples to continue His mission in the surrounding towns. And they go out and they BLESS hundreds of people and when they return, here’s what happens:

**“The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.” - John 6:30**

Jesus listens.

As you flip through the pages of the Gospels our eyes and attention are naturally drawn to story after story of Jesus doing over the top amazing things, miraculous things, like healing the sick, feeding thousands of hungry people and even raising the dead…we tend to remember the exceptional and extraordinary moments but I am afraid we miss far more frequent regular and ordinary moments where Jesus pulls in close to another person and just listens.

Living a life of BLESSing others like Jesus is not limited to the spectacular…In fact, I believe it is best lived out in the regular. In the regular moments where we can pull up within arms reach of another person and actually listen to what is going on in their hearts.

I recently read a story that I think illustrates the importance and un-replaceable practice of actually getting close enough to listen to the people around us in order to BLESS them.

Shorten this… Less medical details, more like a metaphor that we then develop with personal examples.

It takes place in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in the early 90’s. A nurse has been watching a newborn for several hours. Suddenly, the baby turns dark blue, don’t say this almost black. The medical team immediately calls for a doctor and a radiologist and prepare to intervene, convinced that it is a pulmonary collapse – a wide-spread problem for babies placed under artificial respiration – and where a hole has to be made into the chest, in order to insert a tube and suck out the air in order to allow the lungs to fill up again.

But the nurse is convinced that it’s a heart problem. As soon as she saw the baby’s color, she’s suspected that he was suffering a pneumopericardium: air filling the pocket around the heart and stopping it from beating. She therefore tries to stop her colleagues’ preparations screaming “It’s the heart!”. But her colleagues point at the heart monitor showing that the baby’s heart is beating normally.

She insists, pushes their hands away and orders them to be quiet placing a stethoscope on the child’s chest…She stops the swirl of activity and actually listens to the heart of this child…

Not a sound. The heart is not beating.

A neonatal surgeon enters the room and the nurse immediately hands him a syringe. “Pneumopericardium. Prick the heart.” The radiologist, who has just received the test results, confirms the nurse’s diagnostic. The surgeon inserts the syringe into the heart and slowly releases the air pocket preventing it from beating. The baby is safe.

Later, the team understood why the monitor had misled them: it was measuring the electrical activity commanding the heart beats, and this had not stopped: the heart was simply unable to respond to it because of the air pocket pressure.

Sometimes the only way to know how we can love, serve and BLESS the people around us is if we, like Jesus and this nurse…slow down…quiet all the activity and noise…get within ear-shot…AND actually LISTEN…not just hear…the words and hearts of the people God has placed in our lives.

Add a riff of personal example…

* When was the last time I asked the single mom who lives next to me… You might see the single mom pulling into the driveway and think “everything’s fine” but what if we took time to listen.
* When was the last time I asked the person in cubicle next to me…

Maybe tell a personal story where you realized you weren’t really listening.

**Listening to Places**

We can’t bless the world without listening to people, but we need to also be listening to places. Here’s what I mean by that. If we want to listen to our community, or our city, I would encourage you and your small group to adopt a very simple missional practice. Is there an electronic equivalent? The Patch Grab a local newspaper and a highlighter and read it front to back. And as you do, highlight every need you come across. Once you highlight every need, simply allow that to drive a conversation in your group. Of these needs, which ones could we actually meet? Which ones are we particularly passionate about? By reading the paper, we may discover an organization that needs volunteers. We may learn about a local event that we can plug into. We may learn about a person or group of people that really need help. If we simply listen to our community, I believe it will tell us what it needs.

There is a story about Michael Frost that illustrates this in a really powerful way. Frost is an author and church leader who has spent much of his career helping people discover their mission. He tells a story about this missionary group who went to India to serve the poor in a remote village. The group showed up with all sorts of supplies and programs, and skilled workers ready to transform that village to a place of health and vitality. And they went to the people living in what was really a slum, and said “We could build a medical clinic to help take care of the hurting and sick, we could build a school to provide education so the next generation can work their way out of poverty. We could build a church so you could gather on the weekends and learn about God. So what do you want us to do for you?” Sounds a lot like the question that Jesus asked. And the people of the village said “We need a mailbox. The missionaries said, “A mailbox? We can give you a school or a church building and all’s you want your own mailbox? And the people said, “Yes, what we really need most is a mailbox.” See in India, if you live in a slum you do not have a zip code or a mailbox, which means that you do not exist on a map. Even if you are a community of 10 or 20 thousand people, if you don’t have a zip code, you’re not recognized as existing for anything, including social services from the government.. The people did not want a school, medical clinic, or church first. They wanted to be put on a map. They wanted to have an identity. They wanted to become a recognized part of their own country. The missionaries would not have known this unless they listened. And it was no small task. It took the missionaries two years to work through the bureaucracy to get this village registered; but once they did, the village began to be changed.

The places we live and work are constantly speaking…we’ll hear them, if we just listen. Whether it’s a neighborhood association, the school board, chamber of commerce, city council…show up to a meeting and just listen for what God would have you hear there.

Author Dallas Willard put it this way:

 **“The first act of love is always the giving of attention.” -Dallas Willard**

Are we giving attention to the places God has placed us? Are we really listening? The Apostle Paul knew how to listen to places as well. Listen to what we see in Acts 17:

**Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. – Acts 17:22-23**

Before Paul proclaims, he observes. He “walked and looked carefully” at the culture he was going to address. And once he had, he says this:

**“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. – Acts 17:24-25**

Paul understood the inextricable importance of learning to pay attention to the place he was in; leaning in to what God might have him do there.

**Challenge: Listen Daily**

To BLESS the world, we have to first start with the B: we begin with prayer. And next the L: listen to the people and the places where we live and work. Let’s pray for that daily. Perhaps it’s a prayer that looks like this:

**“How do you want me to bless the world for you today? Help me to listen.”**

And then listen. Every day. And when we get together in our small groups, let’s talk about what we’re hearing and what our listening to people and places is telling us. And remember: this is not about us listening so we can go do some good deeds and nice things for people. This is about BLESSING the world. This is about the Jesus Mission: about how to reach and restore people and communities, and have this mission reproduced in the lives of others. Jesus heard that one man’s voice in a huge crowd of people, and everyday, each of us come into contact with people who nobody cares about and nobody listens to. May we truly be transformed into people who have the heart of Jesus and be people through whom God changes lives and changes the world. People who are always listening for the answer to Jesus’ question, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

And there will be needs you’ll be able to observe with your eyes. Needs that are obvious. Needs you can read about in the paper. But sometimes those needs are less noticeable. It may take an intentional closing of our mouths to truly listen with the kind of depth we need in order to really listen to people. Simply hearing is not the same as listening. It may take us turning off our phone, clearing the schedule, but it Is worth it to learn to really listen. And sometimes God will nudge our hearts, even when our physical eyes and ears don’t perceive a thing. I think it’s why Paul wrote things like:

**“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened…” – Ephesians 1:18**

Sometimes in order to listen to people and places, God will lead and direct us in ways, and illuminate realities for us that we could never perceive them on our own. What would it look like for all of us to assume a humble posture, asking God to open the eyes of our hearts to the needs all around us, in order to BLESS our neighbor? What is we spent the next 4 weeks praying every day for the names we wrote down? Can you imagine the kind of impact we would see?

**Conclusion: Transformed**

And here’s the secret of all of this. When we live out these missional practices, not only will we bless the people and communities around us, we’ll be transformed ourselves. We will see and hear more clearly. We will grow in compassion and empathy for others. We will get glimpses of how God is at work. I’ll often hear people say, “I’ll serve once I’ve grown a little more in my faith, once I’m a little more mature” to which I always say, “One of the main vehicles by *which* God grows and matures us is by serving!” The invitation isn’t to have it all figured out, have all our theological ducks in a row, or dot every doctrinal “i” – it’s to step out in faith and trust the God who loved us so much he came after us and keeps coming after us time and time again.

When we learn to truly listen, we’ll find that God does a transformative work in us as well. Let’s pray.

**Communion Idea**

At communion, we celebrate and remember that Jesus listened – really listened, to what God was leading him toward. When he even pleaded with God that there be a different way than the cross, he listened and responded, even though it led to his execution. When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we’re not only remembering something Jesus did thousands of years ago that allows us access to Heaven when we die. In fact, the Apostle Paul says, “that when we eat this bread and drink this cup, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” Coming to the table, we don’t take, but receive the free gift of grace that God offers through Jesus, but it we also receive an invitation to live on mission with him wherever we go. That is the beautiful scandal of the communion table.