**Emotionally Healthy Relationships – Week 3 – Listen Incarnationally**

**Message Big Idea:** To have emotionally healthy relationships, listen with empathy to the words and nonverbal communication of others.

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:37-39; John 1:1-3,14; Genesis 1:1; James 1:19

**Intro:**

(Series slide) Let’s face it. Listening is *hard.* It’s flat out more fun to talk than to listen. If that’s true, chances are that I’m going to have a lot more fun over the next half hour than you. There’s a television writer named Rob Lazebnik who put it this way:

Put in red. Talking is like drinking a great Cabernet. Listening is like doing squats … *[It would be a lot of fun here to have a spreadsheet in one hand and a cinnabon in the other, take a bite and say the next sentence.]* Listening is like reading a corporate report. Talking is like eating a cinnamon bun.

Give me the cinnabon every time! Fun…and delicious!

If talking is sweet, talking about yourself is even sweeter. Harvard conducted some research showing that the same areas of the brain that activate when we eat comfort foods like pizza or fried chicken light up when we talk about ourselves! *(i.e. – like a hit of cocaine from brief)* On average, people spend 60% of their conversations talking about themselves. That number jumps all the way to 80% when it comes to social media. Honestly, I don’t think you could put it any better than the way Brian Reagan puts it here:

**Video: Me Monster, 0:00-0:32**

“Beware of the me monster.” This begs the question, if everyone is talking about themselves, who is listening?

**Series Recap**

We’ve all experienced what it’s like to not be heard. But at the same time, we probably don’t have to look far to find times we have not listened either.

All of us experience disappointments in relationships, but we long for healthy, meaningful relationships. So what do we do?

We’re in week 3 of a 5-week series called “Emotionally Healthy Relationships” that is based on a book/course by Pete and Geri Scazzero. The goal of this series is to help us learn how to better love the people in our lives. Nothing is more important than growing in our ability to love people well!

When Jesus was asked to name the most important commandment he replied: Love God, Love People (Matthew 22:37-39). The mark of a growing Christ-follower is a deepening love for God and a deepening love for people. Sometimes the greatest roadblock to our spiritual maturity is our relational immaturity. But today I want to challenge us to take an honest look at ourselves. We very well may contribute to our own disappointment more than we would ever care to admit. During this series we’re learning 5 relational skills that can help us grow as Christ-followers who are learning to love well.

Today’s skill**: Listen Incarnationally**.

**Quiz: How Well Do You Listen?**

**Handout: Quiz**

Before we get into the meat of my monologue on listening, I think it would help each of us to have an idea of how good we are at this skill. What is being passed out to you now is the net result of all the scientific resources we could muster here at COMMUNITY. A quiz!

Take a moment and go through these statements and evaluate yourself on each. Circle the statements you can affirm. This is for your eyes only, so be honest!

Maybe quiz on screen instead of handout? Include story of personal struggle?

[Give two minutes to take quiz]

1. I give people my undivided attention when they are talking to me.
2. I don’t interrupt to get my point across when another is speaking.
3. When people are upset with me, I’m able to listen to them without being defensive.
4. I have little interest in judging other people or quickly giving my opinion to them.
5. I ask for clarification when listening rather than “fill in the blanks” or make assumptions

Key - If you circled:

 FIVE: outstanding listener, you’re all ears

 FOUR: very good listener, making momma proud

 THREE: good listener, not too shabby

 ONE or TWO: you picked the perfect day to come to church!

**Is Anyone Listening?**

Regardless of where you fall on our quiz, all of us have room to grow as listeners. And no doubt, our world could use more ears that are tuned to listen.

In 2015 the University of California at Berkeley put $100 million dollars into a space travel project to see if there was intelligent life on other planets. The idea was to send out a bunch of tiny nanocrafts at super speeds in directions all over the galaxy. What Stephen Hawking said about the purpose of the project really stood out to me.

 It is important to know if we are alone in the dark. – Stephen Hawking

I have to wonder how many people I pass by each day are thinking the same thing. *(pause)* Am I alone in the dark? Pastor and author John Ortberg put it this way:

 We’re all constantly sending out tiny little probes, emotional nanocrafts, to find out whether we’re alone in the dark. They travel at high speeds, and it’s easy to miss them. They can be small: “Did you see the game last night?” They can be poignant: “I don’t think I’ll ever call my dad again.” They can be deep: “I’m not sure my wife loves me anymore.” They can be urgent: “I have no one else to talk to; can I speak to you confidentially?”

People are desperate for someone, anyone to listen. A New York City couple named Liz Berry and Bill Wetzel spent months on the streets of their city seeing it first hand. Thinking it might be nice for strangers to interact a little bit more, they did something a little crazy and made a sign that simply said, “Talk to me.” Sign in hand, twelve hours a day on the streets of New York, whoever came up to them and whatever they wanted to talk about, Liz and Bill would go with it.

The response was unreal. Over those few months they met hundreds of people totally willing to talk to them, complete strangers, just because they’d listen. They met a police officer who told them about a girl he had dated for six weeks that dumped him and ended up getting engaged to another guy. There was a lady who was ticked off at a teacher for hitting her son. There was a match making optometrist who was bragging about fixing two people up with each other. One guy had recently lost his job. Another had loads and loads to tell them about the scintillating world of estate tax. (shorten)

At the end of one of their days a man ended up talking with them for three hours. Yes…THREE HOURS! His heart was broken over a girlfriend he lost that he couldn’t get over. He talked about the war and how the time passed by so quickly, and even how he had tried to kill himself years ago.

Why? Because so many of us feel like a planet in an empty galaxy…alone in the dark. We’re worlds apart from each other, reaching out into the abyss around us hoping to find someone there. Someone we can talk to. Someone who will listen. It’s our failure to listen that keeps us apart. But if we can listen incarnationally, we pierce the dark and bridge the gap. Worlds apart come together.

**Listening Incarnationally**

You might be thinking, “well I think I know what it means to listen, but what about listening incarnationally?” I’m glad you asked☺ Incarnation is much more than just a four syllable word. It’s a word that packs a lot of power behind it. Incarnation is a central part of the story of God becoming one of us. The Apostle John describes the ~~Word~~ Jesus in this way:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. John 1:1-3 NIV*

The “Word” that John is describing is Jesus, and here he says that Jesus is the eternal, pre-existent, incarnate Word if God. Jesus has existed from eternity past and was present at creation. This sounds a lot like the opening sentence of the creation account in Genesis:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1*

Define incarnation earlier in this section. Explain the preexistence of Jesus. So Jesus is fully God, present with God in the beginning, and now in the incarnation takes on flesh and becomes one of us. John makes it clear as to who exactly this Word is:

*The Word became flesh and blood,
    and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
    the one-of-a-kind glory,
    like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
    true from start to finish. John 1:14 MSG*

**NIV instead of MSG, or together.**

Think about it! The all-powerful, Creator God left the throne of heaven and **moved into the neighborhood**! He became one of us in the person of Jesus. That’s the power of the incarnation. God is not a distant and disconnected God, but a God that is near us, in our neighborhood. Jesus identifies with what it’s like to be human and experienced every human emotion that we too experience: joy, sorrow, anger, suffering, all of it. The incarnation is what makes Jesus relatable. He simply knows what it’s like to be us.

Explain that listening well isn’t quite the same as the actual incarnation. When we listen, we too are identifying with the other person. To listen incarnationally involves us modeling the way of Jesus in our interactions with others. I want us to look at four aspects of the incarnation of Jesus to help us listen incarnationally:

1. **Jesus left his world**. He very well could have remained where he was, with God. But he chose to give up all the rights and privileges that he had in order to become one of us. This is the selflessness of Jesus; giving up what was rightfully his to identify with you and me. When we listen, we too leave our world. We leave the comfort of our own thoughts and opinions to open ourselves up to those of the other person. Leaving our world begins with taking the focus off ourselves and placing it on someone else. It’s helpful here to remember the “emotional probes” to look for that we talked about earlier. People are offering bids for emotional connection all the time, and you and I have the opportunity to recognize them and leave our world to listen to them.
2. **Jesus entered our world.** Jesus entered our world by experiencing everything that it means to be human. He was close enough to listen. He spent time with his apprentices, sharing life with them. Most powerfully, Jesus was always fully present. He took time to be interrupted and give the person his full attention. We too can enter the world of another person by listening. Practically, we do this by:
	1. **Giving the speaker our full attention.** Insider’s tip: making eye contact goes a long way. If we’re constantly looking away or even worse looking at our phone that doesn’t communicate value.
	2. **Step into the speaker’s shoes and feel what they are feeling**. You are human. It’s ok to feel what the other person is feeling. Psychologists actually call this emotional empathy, and it can help form a strong bond with the other person.
	3. **Avoid judging or interpreting.** Resist the urge to come to a conclusion before the speaker is even finished, or be rehearsing your response instead of fully listening. Wisdom from James is helpful here:

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry… James 1:19 NIV*

* 1. ***Reflect back as accurately as you can what you heard them say.*** The wisdom from James reminds us that our first priority is listening. Being quick to listen puts us in a better position to make sure we understand what the person is saying.
1. ***Jesus held onto himself.***

When Jesus became one of us and moved into the neighborhood, He never ceased to be fully God. He held onto his divine status. He was tempted, and yet remained sinless. He remained fully God and fully man. There was no compromise of his divine status in becoming human. When we listen, we too can do it without compromise. Oftentimes we think that if we listen to another person with different beliefs or opinions, we are somehow compromising or becoming complicit. So we avoid listening altogether. This is the tragedy of so many of our relationships. For example, did you see the recent controversy over Popeye’s and Chick-fil-a? Popeye’s came out with a chicken sandwich and immediately the sandwich wars began. Now I bleed Chick-fil-a and believe God blesses us with their chicken sandwich, but I also heard from a lot of people that said Popeye’s also had a good sandwich. So I listened to them and decided to try it, and guess what? It’s good! What would’ve happened had I chosen to ignore their opinion and succumbed to fear of betraying Chick-fil-a?

I’m obviously joking, but what about when it comes to more important issues? In our highly divisive and polarized world we are often quick to dismiss someone who doesn’t think or believe the same things we do. We listen to argue instead of listening to understand. Friends, when we do this we miss an opportunity to listen incarnationally; to model the way of Jesus. We miss an opportunity to love people well!

1. **Jesus hung between two worlds.**

While on this earth Jesus lived in the tension of this world and the next, often reminding his followers of the reality of the temporary. But in the midst of that he didn’t devalue the importance of the moment.

When we listen, we too live in the tension of two worlds. Differing perspectives are not problems to be solved, but tensions to manage.

* Differing political perspectives.
* Differing marriage and family perspectives.
* Differing theological perspectives.

What if we began to live in the tension instead of avoiding it? What if we began to see the tension as an opportunity to love instead of a problem to erase? As we listen incarnationally in the way of Jesus, we maintain the priority of loving them well!

**Challenge: Who Do You Need To Listen To?**

So, if you haven’t already been thinking about someone in your life that you need to listen to, I want to challenge you in that way. Maybe the Holy Spirit has brought someone to mind over the last few minutes. But I want to ask you, who do you need to listen to? It could be someone who:

* Put out an emotional bid for connection
* You’ve dismissed too quickly because of differing perspectives
* Is a different race, ethnicity, or religion

For me personally, God has been challenging me to listen to people who are different than me. Expand on our unwillingness to bridge the gap between us. Sometimes physically next to someone but a million miles away. Too often I find myself stuck in a silo with people who think, act, and believe like I do. I think it’s so easy for us to fall into this. It’s easy for me to do this because it keeps me from uncomfortable or awkward conversations, but the Holy Spirit has really been convicting me lately to get outside of my silo. So this week I plan to reach out to someone who’s totally different than me and just listen. I’m planning to sit down over a cup of coffee and with the help of the Holy Spirit leave my world, enter theirs, and invite the tension as I listen.

Who is that person in your life? The challenge this week is to reach out to them. Have coffee, a meal, or attend a gathering in their world. Listen and learn.

**Conclusion**

The invitation for us today is to join Jesus in bringing health to our world by listening incarnationally. To join him in entering the pain and brokenness, joy and sorrow, triumphs and failures of the people around us. There is no more force powerful than the love we communicate by listening.

*Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:37-39 NIV*

Loving God and loving others are connected in our daily posture of listening. We can’t love God and not listen. When we listen we love. I’m reminded of what David Ausberger said about this:

*Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable. David Ausberger*

Add sentences about this is how we show our love for God and others, in a world that is crying out for love. Reinforce “alone in the dark” language.

Imagine what our relationships would look like if we listened to communicate love. What would happen in our families, neighborhoods, and workplaces?

Imagine if we as Christ-followers became known as the people who listen. Imagine instead of being consumed by the desire to quickly speak our minds we were consumed by the desire to listen. Imagine the hope and healing we could bring to our world. Imagine the people that could find their way back to God.

When we listen, we love. Let us love well.

**Communion Idea**

When we think about listening incarnationally and enter someone’s world, no one is a more perfect example of that than Jesus. He left his world, entered ours, and ultimately gave up his life on the cross so that you and I could live forever with him.

*God made him who had no sin to be sinfor us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21*

In the midst of the brokenness and sin of our relationships, we know they can flourish because Jesus made a way. The brokenness of our relationships doesn’t have the final say because of Jesus. Flawed? Yes. But we have glimpses of God’s desire for our relationships to flourish because of Jesus.