

Teaching Preachers to Listen

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*“The Lord has given me a well-trained tongue
that I may know how to speak to the weary a
word that will rouse them.
Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear
To listen as those who are taught.”
Isaiah 50:4*

*“Let anyone with ears listen!”
Matthew 11:15*

*“What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light;
And what you year whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”
Matthew 10:27*

In the very beginning of the Hebrew scripture, the voice of the Creator speaks, the natural world listens, and the desired form comes into being. The voice of God calls, and the people hear and discern and answer or act. The voice of God and the answering voice of the people are major motifs throughout both Testaments.

According to Loren Johns’ unpublished dissertation, *The Origins and Rhetorical Force of the Lamb*, the invitation to hear is common in the Old Testament, “but the specific implication that one can have ears and still not hear draws on a well-established tradition in the Prophets about the nature of spiritual perception” (p. 223). This same idea recurs in Matthew and Mark, and again in Revelation. “Let those with ears listen!” The person who is addressed is being urged to “perceive spiritually—that is, to go beyond surface interpretation or what seems obvious to the senses; and giving the

warning that failure to perceive spiritually is tantamount to rebellion against God” (Johns: 224).

While the Bible addresses the spiritual need for listening, Socrates addressed the issue of physical listening, pointing out that listening for understanding or comprehension was a skill that would disappear with the spread of written language. Perhaps to some degree that is true. However, now we are moving past the printed page, and the printed media has lost its primacy for many. Listening for comprehension seems to be a skill much in demand again. So both physical and spiritual hearing are very important, and this paper will look at the function they play in the teaching of preachers.

Every communication model, whether simple or complex, includes a **source** of the communication; a **message** of some sort, which is encoded and decoded either electronically, or with words and sounds, or by silent action; and a **receiver** or listener or destination. Different words are used in different models and different communication situations. But that is the bare bones of communication theory. We see how quickly that “simple” model gets complex when we apply it to preaching. The source could be God, the Bible, the preacher, or a host of other possibilities. The messages are multiple including the intended ones and the unintentional ones. The receivers can be hundreds of people doing their individual interpretation. Quickly we realize that the model is simple, but the communication is very complex.

It is interesting to reflect on how much our discussion about communication in ministry focuses on the role of the minister as source. Forgetting that the role the minister plays as receiver is an equally important partner in the communication event. Writers rely on readers, and speakers rely on listeners. Even so, listeners are often thought of as

passive and empty vessels. That understanding of listening is unfortunate and erroneous and comes from the misunderstood relationship between hearing and listening.

The relationship between hearing and listening is a complex one, and despite the fact that in some cases it is difficult to distinguish between them, hearing and listening are generally two distinct processes. Unfortunately many people treat them as one and the same. We do this when we assume that just because we have uttered some words in the presence of someone else, that person will know and remember what was said. All parents and most spouses have had this experience. The scenario goes like this. While the wife is talking the husband leaves the room. The wife says, “listen to me when I talk to you,” and the husband answers, “I can hear you.” To be heard is not enough when you want to be listened to. Just because the hearer was awake and not deaf is no guarantee that the speaker was listened to.

Hearing is a natural process, and provided your ear is not damaged and your brain is functioning normally, you cannot help hearing sounds of a certain intensity and wavelength. But it is very possible to “not listen” whenever you want to. Active listening has several added dimensions beyond hearing, including understanding (or taking in data), paying overt attention (attentiveness), analyzing what is heard, and acting on the basis of what has been heard. Sometimes I think of listening as hearing and paying attention. In some respects, the notion of paying or giving attention might be more accurate than listening, for not all that we hear can be measured in decibels. Often ministers are valued for what they say and do. Parishioners reflect on the words that are eloquently spoken, sermons that are laden with passion, and comfort gently offered, and they seldom think of all the listening that goes into making the speaker effective.

Some of the most significant listening involves discerning the heart of God, noticing the non-verbal actions of a parishioner, or interpreting the seating arrangement at an elders' meeting. I am convinced that for the pastor, listening, or paying attention, is the single most important form of ministry and the activity that defines the pastoral role. The listening that the minister must do includes listening to God as the Spirit gives guidance and reveals the will of God. This spiritual-discerning function of listening often involves no sound waves, but is clearly understood as the guiding language of the Lord God.

Equally important to effective ministry is learning to listen to people and hear their deepest concerns that they communicate in words, actions and silences. Listening to non-verbal communication is an important part of ministry that some find difficult to understand and others choose to regard as insignificant.

The minister must become a master of reading the context as well, whether the context is the congregation member and family, the congregation as a whole, the community or the world. The minister attends to the ministry situation, be that Sunday morning in the sanctuary, at the funeral home or in the nursing home.

As a way of demonstrating my point let us look at the ministry of preaching. Preaching is a ministry task in which the importance of paying attention is quite profound, but when we hear the word preaching, we automatically think either of the action of speaking and delivering a message or about the congregation's need to pay attention. Unfortunately, the preacher is often intensely focused on what will be said and how it will be said. I firmly believe that preachers who want to improve their preaching should pay more attention to their listening.

Minister as Listener

The minister begins the listening journey by **attending to the invitation of God** to join God's ministry team. It should be noted that we use the language of **call** to talk about this spiritual nudging of the Holy Spirit on the life of the one being moved into ministry. This call has an internal component reflecting the call of God and an external or human component reflecting the call of the church. The minister must be willing to listen to the call and after understanding, paying attention to it and discerning, be willing to respond to it in positive ways. This listening and attending to the call of God and the church is often a part of the seminarian's work.

Secondly the minister must **attend to his or her own relationship with God**. A ministry that is not based on a listening relationship with God is hugely compromised. Indeed a pastor must have a confident and loyal faith in Jesus and his saving love; the pastor must have a regular time of communicating with God; and the pastor must be nourished by regular encounters with God. A ministry, which depends solely on the abilities of the pastor, ceases to be ministry. Such a preacher merely gives speeches on religious topics, and such a pastoral-care counselor quickly becomes a social worker. I cannot emphasize this too much. Every quiet time cannot be a desperate search for something preachable or something to read at the hospital bedside. If the pastor is going to serve as one who represents God, the pastor must know God. And we learn to know another by listening to them, not by talking to them.

So the minister is not a pastor and part of that job is preaching. Preaching is a complex integrating task, and there is much to which the preacher must attend. I want us to analyze some of the things to which the preacher must listen or pay attention.

Preacher as Listener

Listening to the Scripture

The **biblical text** is one of the first places that the preacher listens. Sometimes this involves critical methods, text translations, and frequent rereading of the text. But always the point is to listen to the text and hear what God is saying to this preacher through this text. The preacher sits quietly though not idly with the text waiting for the text to speak its truth to the preacher. Barbara Brown Taylor in *The Preaching Life* says, “I cannot think of any other text that has so much authority over me, interpreting me faster than I can interpret it. It speaks to me not with the stuffy voice of some mummified sage but with the fresh, lively tones of someone who knows what happened to me an hour ago” (p. 52).

For the preacher, the Bible is the beginning place for the sermon, and therefore, the preacher must learn who the writer is and to whom the passage is written, what is the intended purpose of the passage, and what was the intended message as it was written for the people to whom it was written. And over the millennia, how has that message been faithfully transcribed and translated?

Then the preacher looks for how that reading of the text might speak to our times. The truth of long ago and far away must somehow be brought to us. Faithful reading of the text is another way of listening to God. The written Word speaks if the preacher will listen. Too often the preacher is in a hurry and the text gets a sloppy hearing at best. Preachers are encouraged to participate in the slow process of sitting with the passage and waiting for the passage to yield its word, and then to listen and pay attention to that word.

Listening to the Context of the Congregation

The next place that the preacher listens is to the immediate context of **the congregation**. The preacher needs to be clear about who will be receiving the message. That shapes the message. The preacher must be aware of the make up and demographics of the congregation. Individual needs in the congregation, and the congregation's corporate needs must also be heard. Preaching is different from other forms of ministry. It is proclaimed in public worship. So in preaching it is the needs of the whole body of the congregation that must be attended to. There is often a significant difference between personal needs and what individuals want, and what is needed by the congregation. The pastor is expected to recognize the difference and preach toward what he or she perceives to be the pastoral needs of the congregation.

Then the preacher goes back to the **text to receive a message for this congregation in this time and situation**. As the preacher attends to both the text and the congregation, the Spirit offers a message for this particular time. The preacher holds the congregation and the text, and listens to them both, back and forth until the preacher can connect a message that the text speaks to a need of the congregation.

Listening to the Scholars and Experts

In the preparation of the sermon, the preacher also listens to **scholars and other experts** who have written articles, books or commentaries on the text or the topic. These voices represent those who are perhaps better prepared to offer light on the chosen text. Listening to these experts can reflect the theology of the text as well as the history of how others have interpreted this text in the past. The preacher does not operate in a vacuum,

and it is important to listen to the voice of the history of interpretation. The preacher must evaluate whether any of these voices are useful in this particular sermon's work, but the voices need to be listened to, understood, analyzed and dealt with. The Holy Spirit joins in the evaluation work.

Listening to the Broader Context

Another significant voice in the preparation process is the **context** beyond the congregation. In contemporary North American churches the role of reading the context and listening to the multiple situations is very important to deciding on the form, illustrations and language that a sermon will have. As mentioned earlier, there is a local congregation for whom the sermon is intended. But the preacher needs to pay attention to the congregation on many levels. In *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale refers to the task of exegeting the congregation (pp. 58ff). Tisdale refers to the preacher as ethnographer. Like a cultural anthropologist with a "participant-observer" field method, the pastor listens to, watches and analyzes the congregation, the larger society and the world and seeks to understand the impact of each on the congregation. The participant-observer is a useful label for the minister who is both in the congregation and apart from the congregation. The world of the congregation is no longer just the congregation and the village. Everyone has access to world events and ideas. So exegesis must also include understanding how the particular congregation understands themselves in light of the world context. After the September 11, 2001, terrorism event, people heard biblical texts with very different ears, and the impact of these events caused them to interpret texts differently.

The preacher must listen to the language of the congregation, noting the pronunciation, idioms and trigger words, before shaping the sermon for this particular congregation. Each region has its own way of speaking—sometimes the vocabulary even changes. The effective preacher will listen for these words and ways and make listening as easy for the congregation as possible.

Listening During the Deliver of the Sermon

During the delivery of the sermon, the preacher still needs to attend to the **Spirit of God, the sermon text and the receivers**. Always the preacher must be listening to the Spirit as it ministers. Sometimes the Spirit may ask the preacher to change the sermon in major or slight ways. Sometimes the Spirit may encourage the preacher, or provide strength, or in other ways attend to the preacher. The Spirit and the preacher must listen to one another so the work of the preaching ministry can be accomplished.

But the preacher must also be listening to the **text of the sermon**. Perhaps this seems obvious, but just recently I reviewed a video of a sermon that a student preached before a congregation. At one point the student stopped. He lost his train of thought. Later he confessed that he got to thinking about his headache and just forgot what he was talking about. Preachers who can't manage to pay attention to the sermon they are preaching should not be shocked to learn that the listeners are having trouble as well. In *Performing the Word*, Jana Childers reflects on the importance of concentration for the preacher. Particularly she calls concentration focused attention and hearing that is strong and unwavering. It eliminates distraction, helps the preacher stay focused on the task and

lets the task absorb you (p. 104). Stripped of the distractions, the preacher stands in service of the sermon.

At the same time the preacher is listening to the Spirit and paying attention to the sermon they are preaching, this minister of the Word needs to be listening to **the eyes and hearts of the congregation**. It always amazes me when a student stands in front of the class to preach and sees nothing or hears nothing in the silent faces of the listeners. All movement is meaningful and the effective preacher must learn to interpret sleepy listeners, agitated listeners, restless listeners, thoughtful listeners and questioning listeners. Listening to the silences that are present is also the preacher's task. The silences should never be equated with the absence of communication. It is the task of the preacher to be able to listen to the non-verbal voices of the congregation and accurately understand what they are saying. I believe that reading the text of the congregation is as important to successful communication as reading the biblical text.

Therefore, listening is centrally important to faithful, effective preaching. And for the teacher of homiletics the big question that remains is how does one teach seminarians to listen well?

Teaching Listening to Preachers

In this paper I want to outline three ways to help homiletics students work at the skill of listening. I have chosen to identify here exercises that will not be duplicated in other seminary classes. For example, I am not listing how to listen to the biblical text

since these are taught thoroughly in most biblical studies classes. Rather I want to present how students are taught to listen to God; how they are taught to listen to the congregation as a whole; and how they are taught to listen to individuals in the congregation.

Listening to God

One of my deepest concerns is that the preacher faithfully listens to God. So often preachers are concerned with the well-trained tongue that they forget the second part of the Isaiah 50:4 passage. Indeed, those who do not listen have nothing to say. For it is the Lord who wakens our ears to listen to whatever it is that is spoken to it and us is the Lord who trains our tongue.

In our seminary's introductory preaching class students are asked to fill in a weekly "Spiritual Journey Report" form. The form (a full page sheet) is made up of three questions.

1. **Where did you encounter God this week?** [Students often begin by naming things like corporate worship, private devotions, or a Bible study. But students soon begin to realize that they are hearing God in nature, singing, exercising, bread baking, neighbors and friends. Later in the semester they are hearing God in the newspaper, in life's troubles and joys. The point is to help them see and hear the voice of God wherever it speaks, and to recognize places that they most often hear from God. If God speaks to me in bread baking, I had better be baking up a storm.]

2. **What did you hear?** [The point of this question is to ask them to reflect on what it is that God is saying. One can have a vague, fuzzy sense of God's presence without a conscious awareness of what God desires to communicate. This question urges them to pay attention to the message that God is sending. Sometimes it is simply, "I am with you and I love you," but that is a powerful and important message for a pastor as well as a layperson.]
3. **What are you going to do with this message?** [The preacher is a communicator and so this question asks the student to reflect on what will happen now with this message. The student needs to decide if this is a message just for the individual personally or if this is something that needs to be shared and how. Is this sermon material?]
4. **Reviewed and signed by a spiritual friend.** [Each student is asked to select someone (a friend or spouse or classmate) who can read the report every week—the same person all semester—and talk with the student about it and notice changes and concerns.]

These are turned in each week and I read every one of them. But since I have over twenty students I do not respond to them. I want students to know that they are free to write about whatever has come to them without worrying about me coming running to them to offer "care." I do care about my students, but this is a pedagogical tool. If they want me to provide pastoral care, they need to give me some indication that they want that. Occasionally major issues will surface in these reports like a death in the family or an incarceration. I try to respond to the person when I see them in class, but I assume

they have other people to care for them. Once in a while a report will include the note, “I would like to talk to you about this.” And then we make an appointment.

The response to this assignment has been that students ask to continue doing this after seminary. I encourage them to find a spiritual friend where they will relocate and continue the practice.

Listening to the Context of the Congregation

This assignment is to do a congregation analysis. It is important for students to know the congregation to whom they are preaching. Sometimes our students will be doing congregational studies in other courses so this assignment could overlap.

Often students think only of the universal human values and concerns and they do not take the time to analyze the congregation as a collective group. What is the history of this congregation? What does it consider to be its mission? What does the congregation view as its successes and what is the congregation ashamed of from its history? What is the role of the congregation to others in the geographical area? How does the congregation fit in theologically with the larger denomination? What are the congregation’s growing edges?

These questions along with the other more common demographic questions (How many members? Men? Women? Children? Youth? Education levels? Kinds of jobs? How many miles do they live from the church? And others.) will be important to the preacher who is trying to hear what God wants to say to this congregation.

Preaching is not just for individuals. It is for the congregation as a whole and we hear it as a group. Preaching transforms us as a group. Therefore, it is important for the

preacher to know the congregation as a whole. Yes, the group is made up of individuals but as congregations we are more than individuals.

Listening to the People

Homiletics students have long had the opportunity to learn from the people that listen to them. None of us would think to teach preaching without response groups to respond to the student's preaching. Five to seven people from the listening congregation are selected and trained to respond to the student's preaching. After each sermon they meet to discuss both the content and the delivery of the sermon. It is important for them to discuss the strengths as well as the problems, but it is important to discuss the problems. Some groups are too nice and don't want to offend the young preacher.

There is, however, another way for the preacher to hear from a small group of individuals. Each student who preaches in a congregation (as our second year interns do as part of their field education) is expected to form a group of individuals from the congregation who will meet with the student two times before each sermon.

The first meeting is two weeks before the sermon. At this meeting the texts for the sermon Sunday are read and the student makes a few comments of what is being heard in the initial study time. Then the group together discusses the passages, shares what strikes them as important, comments on what things from their lives connect with the passage.

During the second meeting the student brings a sharable outline of the sermon that is growing from the work and listening of the past week. Group members focus on the ideas that they hear and offer illustrations from their lives that might be helpful to the

student in final preparation. It seldom happens, but if the student seems theologically or biblically off base the group has a responsibility to save the student from great embarrassment.

One of the side advantages of this sermon preparation support group is that the new preacher gets to know the group and the group gets to know the preacher. They form a bond of support that is helpful to the preaching itself. The group also feels a sense of ownership with the sermon they helped shape and they become very supportive listeners during Sunday worship.

Conclusion

I am convinced that listening is a primary ministry activity. Many people just need someone to listen to them. We need to redeem the word “listen” to the active productive task that it is. Unfortunately, many regard listening as a non-productive activity. They see listening as sitting around doing nothing. North Americans have a fixation on multi-tasking and the successful person must be doing several things at one. We see people driving cars while talking on the telephone or reading a magazine while on the treadmill. I want to propose that listening is the most important thing the minister does; that it can be done best in a concentrated, focused form; and that it connects us as ministers to God, to the Bible and to the congregations we serve. As teachers of homiletics we must give more of our instruction energy to teaching listening.

Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen!