Discover Your Mission Now - Week 3 – L is for Listen
Luke 18:35-43
A Message adapted from Community Christian Church, Naperville, IL.
The Woodside Church March 23, 2014

We are going to talk about “listening” today, but not just “listening” in general. “Discover Your Mission Now” is about each of us becoming part of the Jesus Mission to 1) reach people who don’t know the love of God in Jesus, 2) restore the world to be more like it was meant to be, a place without hunger and poverty and loneliness and hopelessness and addiction and 3) reproduce this mission by inviting as many people as possible to join in the Jesus Mission of reaching and restoring.

During this series we will learn 5 practical ways to do the Jesus Mission. They are based on the acronym “B.L.E.S.S.” We are blessed by God to be a blessing to the whole world. Genesis 12:2-3: “I will bless you…and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Last week Gloria talked about what the “B” in Bless stands for. Anybody remember? The B is for “Begin with Prayer”. The first practice is to begin each day with a prayer that asks God “How do you want me to bless the world today?” and “Who do you want me to bless?” Keep that prayer on your mind as you interact with people where you live and work: co-workers, students in your school, neighbors, the barista at the coffee shop. Use the “Invest and Invite” Card by praying for people who may be far from God. We want God’s direction on how we go about blessing the world. B stands for “Begin with Prayer” That’s the B. The “L” stands for…. “Listen.” To bless the world, to bless the people God brings our way, we need to practice listening. Here’s a story of what happened when Jesus listened.

When Jesus was coming close to Jericho, a blind man sat begging beside the road. The man heard the crowd walking by and asked what was happening. Some people told him that Jesus from Nazareth was passing by. So the blind man shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” The people who were going along with Jesus told the man to be quiet. But he shouted even louder, "Son of David, have pity on me!"

Now, let’s pause our story for just a second so we don’t miss something. Jesus was on His way to the city of Jericho. This was one of the last stops on the way to the Passover Feast in Jerusalem. Mobs of people took the same road. Jericho was an extra-bustling place this time of year. Picture the Ben Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July. It’s totally packed. In the middle of this mass movement, there is a beggar. He can’t see Jesus but he can hear the Lord passing by. So he cries out, “Have mercy on me.” Despite the din of the crowd, Jesus hears this one guy. About a decade ago we used to have a church picnic at Woodside with lots of games. One game was named “The Mommy Call.” We blindfolded a bunch of moms and put their kids at the opposite end of the field. Then we told all the kids to cry out at the same time. The mom who heard her child and got there first was the winner. I remember one time we blew the whistle and one mom sprinted down the field ahead of all the others. Her name? Karen Houser. Talk about superfeet! That’s why she’s leading Run for God. Like a mother listening for her child, Jesus hears one guy in this massive crowd calling him. The people traveling with Jesus tell the beggar to be quiet. But he cries out even louder.
Jesus stopped and told some people to bring the blind man over to him. Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, I want to see!" he answered. Jesus replied, "Look and you will see! Your eyes are healed because of your faith. (Luke 18:39-42)

Now, you knew that was coming, right? Blind man can’t see, calls out to Jesus, Jesus heals him. The end. But not so fast: what I want us all to notice is the question Jesus asks the blind man: “What do you want me to do for you?” Sounds like a silly question, doesn’t it? Jesus can tell he’s blind. So why does He ask the blind man what he wants? I believe it shows Jesus didn’t assume He knew what the man needed. He asked questions. He listened. When it comes to living out the Jesus Mission, listening is crucial. Jesus listened first, then healed. After we begin our mission with prayer, the next step is not doing but listening. To discover and embrace our mission, we have to practice listening. Listening is so crucial in the Jesus Mission.

The Problem of Not Listening

We live in a world where people rarely listen. Most people are more interested in what they have to say. There’s a saying “The opposite of listening is not speaking, it’s waiting to speak.” Isn’t that true? When we’re not talking, we are often thinking over what we’re going to say next. I struggle with this. Too many times I’m not really listening closely to people. I’m just cueing up what I’m going to say. Yet listening is essential in all our relationships. Maybe you’ve said, “You never listen to me.” Maybe it’s been said to you. How many of you have ever been in a conversation where it felt like the other person was just not listening at all? Why did so many women raise their hand while glaring at their husbands? In his book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, John Gray says men and women relate differently. In essence, men want to fix things and women just want someone to listen. If a wife comes home and complains to her husband about her job, the man instantly wants to say, “Why don’t you quit that job?” But the woman doesn’t want a solution. She just wants him to listen. She simply wants him to listen. Well I’m a professional listener. I get paid to listen to people. But I know even I can improve. So one day my wife Lisa came home and complained about her work. I used every skill in my pastoral tool kit to just listen and not say, “Why don’t you quit that job.” This is what I said: “Uh huh. Uh huh. Uh huh.” I was really good at it. I wanted to give myself an award for restraining the fix-it gene on my y-chromosome. Then my wife called her older sister, who is one of her mentors and also a physical therapist and told her the situation at work. What did the sister say? “You need to quit that job!” I said, “Hey! She stole my line!”

Listen to People

The inventor of the stethoscope, Rene Laennec, was noted for saying, “If you use this tool, don’t stop listening to your patients, they are telling you how to heal them.” He feared that doctors would use his invention to listen to hear its and lungs but stop listening to their patients. That’s a magnificent principle, isn’t it? We must listen to people in our families, our workplaces, our schools and our communities. Listen to the hurts, the needs, the wounds of those whom God places in our lives. We must listen for what they really need.

Now when I say, listen to people, I’m not just talking about the words that come out of their mouths. Listen for where people really are in their lives. In real estate the three most important things about a piece of property are LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. That’s
also true of people. Dr. John Gottman researches why marriages succeed and fail. Along the way one thing he discovered is unhappily married couples THINK they know what makes their spouse worried and what makes them excited but they actually don’t. That is what I mean by a person’s “location.” According to Dr. Gottman, happily married couples do know those things. In a manner of speaking, happily married couples know each other’s emotional/personal location. Happily married people don’t have some intuitive sixth sense about their spouses. They listen to each other. They pay close attention to each other’s lives. This is a question we need to ask the people close to us on a regular basis. You can ask your kids: “So what are you most excited about these days and what are you most concerned about?” To really know someone it’s good to regularly ask them what they are most excited about and most concerned about. I urge you to start asking the important people in your life about their emotional location.

When it comes to discovering our mission in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our families, and our schools; we must listen for the location of people. We can’t assume we know what to do for people we meet. We need to know their “location.” What makes them excited? What matters most to them? What challenges are they facing? What needs do they have? People in our world desperately want to be heard. One of the myths today is that people don’t want to talk about religion, spirituality or faith. I find the opposite is true. I don’t think people bring these up to me because they know I’m a preacher. In fact, I would be the last person they would ask because, as people love to say, “I don’t want someone to preach at me.” If you take the time to listen, if you really put the other person first, spiritual questions will naturally and inevitably arise. People are asking and wondering about the big questions of life: What is my purpose? Why am I here? How can I be free from this pain, this emotional wound, this powerful addiction? Is there a God? Is God with me? Is there more to life than this? Is there life after this? Why don’t we hear these questions? We don’t take the time to really listen. If we are patient, if we really listen, they will eventually come out. The question is: Are we listening?

**Listen to Places**

We cannot bless the world without listening to people, but we also need to listen to places. Michael Frost is an author and church leader whose mission is to help people discover their mission. He tells a story about this missionary group that went to India to serve the poor in a remote village. The group showed up with supplies and programs and skilled workers ready to transform that village to a place of health and vitality. They told the villagers, “We can build a medical clinic to care for the hurting and sick. We can build a school to provide education so the next generation can work their way out of poverty. We can build a church so you can gather to worship and learn about God. So what do you want us to do for you?” Sounds a lot like the question Jesus asked. The people of the village said “We need a mailbox.” The missionaries said, “A mailbox? We can give you a clinic, a school or a church building and all you want is a mailbox?” The people said, “Yes. What we really need most is a mailbox.” They wanted their own official zip code. In India, if you live in a slum you do not have a zip code or a mailbox you do not exist on a map. You can be a community of 10 or 20 thousand people, but if you don’t have a zip code you are not recognized by the government and therefore you do not receive social services. The people did not want a school, medical clinic, or church first. They wanted to be put on a map. They wanted an identity. They wanted to become a recognized part of their own country. The missionaries would not know 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 change.

If we want to listen to our community or our city, I encourage you and your Growth group to adopt a very simple practice. Grab a local newspaper and a highlighter and read it front to back. And as you do, highlight every need that you run across in that paper. Once you highlight every need, simply allow that to drive a conversation in the group. Of these needs, which ones can we meet? Which ones are we interested in or passionate about? By reading the paper, we may discover an organization that needs volunteers. We may learn about a local event we can help. 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.

A pastor starting a new church in the city of Chicago decided she would listen to the area where she lives by showing up at community gatherings and events. At a neighborhood block meetings she listened and learned there is a need to do a better job caring for the seniors in their community. So she started dreaming about building volunteer teams to do senior wellness checks during severe weather. At Chamber of Commerce meetings she learned the businesses that sponsor and participate in the festivals in their neighborhood have a hard time finding volunteers to help with the festivals. Maybe her church could supply the volunteers? At forums hosted by the city councilman she learned the #1 reason families move out of her neighborhood is the quality (or lack thereof) of the high schools. She began thinking about how God could use her church to come alongside these schools and make them better.

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.

**Listen Daily**

To BLESS the world, first 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. “How do you want me to bless the world for you today? Help me to listen.” And then listen each day. And when we get together in our Growth groups, let’s talk about what we’re hearing and what people and places are telling us. Remember: this about BLESSING the world. This is about the Jesus Mission: 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. Every day each of us comes in contact with people who nobody cares about and nobody listens to.

There is a woman named Jan who works for Athletes in Action – a ministry that shares the Good News with student athletes. After attending a conference which stressed the importance of listening to seekers, Jan and others were relaxing in the hotel whirlpool. Two adolescent girls joined them in the tub. One of the teens, named Brittany, began passionately telling her friend about an upcoming Wiccan gathering she was planning to attend. Jan says,

Normally we would have tried to counter the girl's ideas, but we decided to listen instead. I said something simple like, "Wow, you really sound excited about this!" This was all
the encouragement she needed to launch into a five-minute explanation of why she was so attracted to neo-pagan rituals. The bottom line was that she'd had a really traumatic time in high school and the Wiccas accepted her. She said, "I've gone through so much (junk) just trying to make it through high school that I'll probably be in therapy for the rest of my life!"

I tried to mirror back what she said with, "It's hard for you to even imagine a future where you'd be free from all of the pain you've gone through."

What came next completely floored me. With a film of tears starting to form in her eyes and with complete sincerity in her voice, she said, "Sometimes I wish I could be born all over again. I'd really like to start over from scratch." After a long pause, my friend asked if she would really like to be born again. "Yes, I really would," she said.¹

They are talking. Are we listening?

¹Steve Sjogren, Dave Ping, Doug Pollock, Irresistible Evangelism (Group Publishing), p. 109.