

SERMON: "PRAYER – WHO YOU TALKING TO?"
TEXTS: NEW TESTAMENT ACTS 17:22-31

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INTRODUCTION

You know any good listeners?

Can you name them and what makes them good listeners?

Sharing those insights about what makes for a good listener might help people in your life who could use some extra credit in that class

You know any not so good listeners? Allow me to offer a few examples

One not so good habit. This one is one I have been guilty of.

Listening ... and then offering advice without being asked for advice.

'Listen up Dave, you don't always need to put on your problem solving hat.

The person talking needs your attention, not necessarily your advice'

Another not so good listener. The person who is looking at their phone

while you are talking to them. Not only that, their fingers are busy doing something

Sending a text, playing a game, buying something off Amazon.

Please stop the multi-tasking and listen with your ears, eyes ... and fingers.

One more. Let's talk customer service ... talk to customer service

Again with the fingers again. You're on the phone and you hear this ...

"Please press 1 for this, 2 for that, 3 for something else."

And they still haven't given a number for your concern.

This is when you might start hitting 0 for operator or repeating

in a tone that gets louder and louder ... representative, representative.

Then to add insult to injury they start playing some bad music

which is occasionally interrupted by what truly ironic turn of phrase?

"Please stay on the line. Your call is important to us." Oh, is it now?

There is another trend even more frustrating – some truly bad listening.

That is when there is no one to answer, no customer service number to call,

No one to talk to. No one. We may get a chat option (those are fun)

or a list of common questions and the links for the answers.

Times like that, I actually miss "Your call is important to us."

Enough about bad listening. Let's talk about good listening.

You know who is a really good listener? Jesus!

That is right, I'm talking about Jesus listening to our prayers.

That is what prayer is. It is talking to Jesus. It is Jesus listening

And yes, it is also Jesus talking with us, us listening to Jesus.

Our passage this morning isn't really about prayer

It is, however, about connecting to God.

DON'T KNOW

Paul is in Athens. He has noticed things in his time in the city.

In his own way he is listening to the city. He listens and then speaks

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you ...

Paul, despite his well-deserved reputation for being argumentative and despite the fact that verse sixteen tells us

"he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols"

does not launch into a finger pointing attack on their idolatry

He instead identifies with their religious curiosity ... a compliment

He compliments them for their searching. He finds common ground

He begins with God as creator, suggesting that God made everything

including us and our hunger to know God. Verse 27 speaks of that hunger this way

"... so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him though indeed he is not far from each of us."

Paul is walking a fine line by pointing out this altar to an unknown god

He wants to identify with them, with that searching for god

He doesn't want to come across as condescending, like some kind of 'know it all'

You ever have trouble with your technology? Need a little help?

Saturday Night Live has featured skits about how smug the IT people might be

How they might unintentionally (or intentionally) make you feel not so smart

'Yes. I turned it off and started it again. I even unplugged it

And yes, that is the limit of what I know about how to fix my tech.'

I'm so thankful our tech person, Jesse, doesn't do that.

I've had that happen a time or two before with other people. Have you?

Our grandson, Leo, is less than a year old but I'm already looking forward to asking him how to fix my phone or computer

Image - Leo with phone

Not knowing can be frustrating. We want to know. So too the people in Athens.

They wanted to know about God. Paul took that altar to an unknown god as an invitation to share what he knows about God. Paul then does what he can do to help them move from "Don't Know" to "We Know."

He does so by telling them what he knows about Jesus

Show first image of Jesus

YOU KNOW

In this passage, Paul jumps right to the end of the story ... to the resurrection
We pick things up at verse 29

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Paul is telling us that Jesus is the man God has appointed to judge the world in righteousness. The proof of that appointment is Jesus' resurrection. That victory over death is what sets Jesus apart from every other judge

That focus on Jesus' resurrection, I would suggest, fits with our focus on prayer
The one hearing our prayers is the one appointed to judge the world in righteousness
The one hearing our prayers has the power to answer them
He has shown that power by defeating death

Going back to the fun of being on hold, sorting through their choices – press 1 for this
Instead of pleading with our phones and saying “operator” or “representative”
or even asking to talk to a supervisor or manager ... when we pray
we are talking to the one who has defeated death, the risen Christ
We are talking to our Savior, to Jesus ... as in “Jesus loves me this I know”

And we know this because ... what does the song say? Because the bible tells me so.
Here's where the sermon shifts gears. I'd like to try some 'Show and Tell'
I've done most of the tell part, let's do a couple of things for the 'show'
I want to reinforce what Paul is saying ... This is no unknown God
This is a God you know. Jesus. You know Jesus.

You know Jesus from the greatest story ever told, the gospels
Can you help me with the 'show?' Please reach in the pew rack in front of you
Take the bible and hold it up in front of you looking at the front cover
Think of the front, the first part, as what it is, our Old Testament
And now turn it around. Think of the back as the New Testament letters

And now look at the spine of the bible, the middle that binds it together
This bind, this bridge, is the story of Jesus of Nazareth,
the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

It is the stories of Jesus that tie it all together. We make sense of everything before
all the Old Testament (the creation stories, the exodus, the law and prophets)
and everything after (the story of the early church, all the letters) all of it
through Jesus. He is the center of it all.

SUMMARY

The best advice I ever heard about how to interpret the bible is
to interpret everything it says through what Jesus said and did
What Jesus says and does (or doesn't say) comes first
He is the foundation on which everything else is built

Think about it this way. When Christians argue we tend to throw around
bible verses like some kind of 'holy hand grenades.' You quote Paul,
I counter with Micah. And not much good comes from it

But when we pray ... we don't pray to David or to Paul
Sure, their words and their stories shape our faith as they should
But Jesus comes first. We follow Jesus. We pray in his name.
When we pray we talk with Jesus

The unknown God is known to us. It is Jesus
It is Jesus whom we know through the gospels
When we pray, we don't have to know it all
Thank God for that. Literally.

When we pray we know who we are talking to
We are talking to Jesus. You know Jesus
Not some made up character, not some personal Jesus of your own creation
Not some unknown God who answers us with nothing but silence

We pray to Jesus whom we know
And in that knowing, we already know how he answers us
We've heard about him, read about him. We know him

When we pray to Jesus, this is who we are talking to
Just a few reminders

Images of Jesus in order (Please hold each image for 3 seconds)

Birth
Baptism
Teaching
Greatest commandment
Feeding
Healing

Eating with sinners
Turning tables
Arguing with pharisees
Praying
Cross
Resurrection