

Occasion: Third Sunday after Epiphany [C]

Date: 01-24-2010

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-10

Title: How to Listen to a Sermon

Introduction:

I'm going to read you some short stories containing a "Pun" – a play on more than one meaning of the same word. Let's see if you can get the "Pun".

1. My son, Ken, was married yesterday. I heard him tell his bride, Caryn, that his ring was so tight it was cutting off his circulation. She replied, "That's what it is supposed to do."
2. The policeman couldn't believe his eyes when he saw a woman drive past him on the freeway, busily knitting. Quickly he pulled alongside the vehicle, rolled down his window and shouted, "Pull over!" "No," the women yelled back cheerfully, "Socks!"
3. The chef at a family-run restaurant had broken her leg and came into our insurance office to file a disability claim. As I scanned the claim form, I did a double take. Under "Reason unable to work," she wrote: "Can't stand to cook."
4. A man was overheard talking to a police officer: "I rear-ended this car. I knew it was going to be a REALLY bad day. When the driver got out of his car, I noticed that he was a DWARF! He came over, looked up at me and said, "I am NOT happy!" So I said, "Well, which one ARE you then?" And, honestly, that's how the fight started."



The use of a "Pun" can be humorous (*or almost humorous*). But, to get the "Pun" the person hearing the words has to be listening attentively. Otherwise, the "Pun" usually goes right over his head.

What is true of a "Pun" is also true for a **Sermon**! To get the **Sermon** you have to be listening attentively, otherwise, it usually goes right over your head. What makes a **Sermon** good? What helps the listener to "Get It"?

Giving advice to a young pastor on how to preach, one member of the congregation said, "Make sure you have finished speaking before the congregation has finished listening."

Setting:

If brevity is the sole characteristic of a "Good" **Sermon**, "Good" preaching, or effective instruction, then Ezra the priest was an utter failure. Scripture tells us in the Old Testament Lesson:

³He [Ezra the priest] read it [the Law] aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. – *Nehemiah 8:3*

But Ezra was no failure! Though he read the Scriptures to the people for many hours, –somewhere around 5 to 6 hours– the message did not "go over the heads" of the people, but found a warm welcome in their hearts and in their lives.

Today, as we consider the event of Ezra's reading of the Law before the people of Israel, we see in the Israelites the way for all God's people to come before Him in worship and the attitude with which they are to hear God's Word and to be blessed from the message that is proclaimed. The title for today's message is therefore: "**How to Listen to a Sermon**".

I. PREPARE FOR HEARING THE WORD:

Most people probably think that the sermon begins when the pastor opens his mouth to preach. If the sermon is to be effective, then that cannot be the assumption. While the sermon appears to begin with the verbal preaching of the Word, the reality is, the sermon begins much earlier in the week. The sermon begins, not with the preaching of the message, but with the **Preparation** of the message.

We read in the book of Nehemiah:

⁷³When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, ^{8:1}all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel... ⁴Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion... ⁵Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. – *Nehemiah 7:73b-8:1, 4-5*

The people had planned to gather on the first day of the seventh month, the secular "New Year's Day" of the Hebrew calendar (*Leviticus 23:23-25*). Just days earlier, the Israelites, who had returned from exile in Babylon had completed rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. For this people, it was time for a New Beginning in the land of Israel. On the first day of the New Year, they planned to rededicate themselves to the Lord in accordance with His Law given through Moses. They planned to gather on this day at the square before the Water Gate and they built a high wooden platform where the Law of God was to be read.

Christian congregations have a place set aside for worship, a time set apart for worship, a platform (pulpit) set aside for proclaiming God's Word during worship and a person charged with the responsibility to proclaim God's Word (the pastor) in worship. With all these preparations already in place, only one more item has to be prepared for the hearing of God's Word–YOU! God said through the prophet Isaiah:

"This is the one I esteem:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My Word." – *Isaiah 66:2*

God's people have a deep respect and awe of God's Word. They approach His Word in humility and reverence.

You can prepare for worship each week first of all by praying for the pastor and his preparation of the sermon. The pastor has many responsibilities and Satan would like

nothing more than diminishing the amount of time and the quality of the time a pastor has for preparation of the sermon. Your prayer for the pastor's preparation of the sermon helps him and you focus on the importance of the teaching of God's Word. Second, you can prepare for the sermon by reading the lessons for worship that Sunday. On the home page of St. Paul's website, you will find the Scripture Lessons for the upcoming Sunday Worship Service and links to the Scriptures. Sometime during the week, take a few moments and invest your time in reading those lessons and thinking on what God is saying in the Scriptures. In this way, you will be familiar with the Word before you hear it read or taught on Sunday.

II. LISTEN ATTENTIVELY TO THE WORD:

When you arrive at worship, devote yourself to worship. Make a conscious effort to focus on God's Word and to turn away from letting your mind wander on personal matters. When Jesus taught, He expected those listening to be focused on His Words and inquisitive about what Spiritual Truth they revealed. In Mark's Gospel we read:

²³If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

²⁴"Consider carefully what you hear," He continued.

"With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.

²⁵Whoever has will be given more;

whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." – *Mark 4:23-25*

Jesus taught that you will only "get out" of the sermon, what you "put into" understanding it. Little effort to hear and comprehend will result in little understanding. On most Sundays of the year, you will receive a printed copy of the message for the day. As pastor, my greatest desire is that you learn the Scriptures and grow in faith. You receive a copy of the message because I believe that is helpful to most people, who learn not only by hearing the Word, but by seeing it, reading it, and hopefully processing it in their minds. While I follow the printed message you receive fairly close, I do not try to read it all word-for-word. I encourage you to take the copy of the message you receive home with you for reference and further study. I also encourage you to share it with others. You can even go online, on St. Paul's website and find copies of past messages. Whatever you put into learning God's Word is what you will get out of it. Remember Jesus' warning: **"whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."** Is it any wonder that people who put little or no effort into learning the Word end up falling away from worship, from the church, and many times from faith?

When Ezra read the Law of God, we are told that the priests—the Levites, were standing among the people, to explain to them the meaning of what they had heard, so that the people thoroughly understood everything that was being read.

⁷The Levites instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

⁸They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. – *Nehemiah 8:7-8*

Shortly after you leave the worship service, ask yourself, "What was the emphasis of the message? What was the main point? The sub-points?"

III. APPLY THE WORD TO YOUR LIFE:

Twenty-three days after the Israelites heard the first reading of the Law by Ezra, Scripture tells us:

¹⁰On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads... ²They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. ³They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.

– *Nehemiah 9:1-2*

As you understand the Word of God from the sermon, apply it to yourself. Do you have sins that need to be renounced, confessed and forgiven? Have you neglected someone that you need to help? Is there some spiritual discipline or act that you need to add to your life? Whatever sin you should forsake and abandon, do it! Whatever spiritual virtue you need to embrace and add to your life, do it! James writes in his letter:

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

– *James 1:22*

The apostle Paul encouraged the Galatian Christians:

⁷Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

⁸For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. – *Galatians 6:7-8*

And Jesus Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, warned those who heard His Sermon:

²¹"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father Who is in heaven." – *Matthew 7:21*

Conclusion:

Communication requires a transmitter and a receiver, a speaker and a hearer. If you have a radio transmitter sending out a signal, but no receiver, the message will go unheard, no matter how powerful the radio signal. If you have a radio receiver but no transmitter, the radio may be operating perfectly, but there will be no signal to receive and no communication. The same is true for human communication. For human communication to occur, you need a speaker and a hearer. If the speaker has a great message, but no one to hear, or one who hears but does not "listen" to what is said—no communication occurs. And naturally, with only a hearer and no speaker, no message is heard.

God has spoken to us and His message is recorded in the Scriptures. Of all the words ever recorded, only God's Word offers forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through faith in Jesus. God's Word has the power to create faith in our hearts dead in sin and to enlighten our minds the are ignorant of God and Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians:

¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: – *Romans 1:16*

"²³If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." AMEN