

Scripture:

Jeremiah 32:1-15

Luke 16: 19-31

## “Listening.”

Our scripture passages this morning provide us with two diametrically opposed reactions to the Word of God.

On the one hand Jeremiah faithfully listens to God and does as God so directs him to do --- buying a piece of property in the most unlikely of times and circumstances.

And on the other hand we have the unnamed man of extreme wealth in Luke’s gospel who continually ignores the Word of God coming in a little bit different way ----- through the poor beggar Lazarus at his gate.

One commentator referring to our passage from Luke’s gospel today faithfully noted that very often the main obstacle to faith is not lack of proof --- but rather an excess of other interests and investments ---- things like --- time --- money --- dreams and so on ----- things that are of prime interest to us but not necessarily primary in God’s eyes.

And it’s true --- very often it has nothing to do with any kind of proof that keeps people from the truth of the gospel ---- instead it’s personal preoccupations --- personal wants and personal desires that cloud our ability to be open.

The rich man after dying and seeing things from the perspective of the afterlife quickly realizes that his priorities were all skewed during his life time.

He realizes that He totally missed the boat and ignored what He was really supposed to be concerned with in life --- caring for others and sharing some of what God had blessed him with.

And so --- later on his journey --- in his time after his earthly time --- there is a great role reversal.

Poor Lazarus who begged at the rich man's gate now rests in peace in the bosom of Abraham while the rich man dwells in agony.

Not wanting his brothers and their families to suffer the same fate as he --- the rich man begs that Lazarus go to his family to warn them not to make the same mistake he did.

He wants his family to know that they should do as God wants them --- look after the poor --- feed the needy --- and not just get all caught up in amassing riches and making sure they are personally fulfilled without also considering the plight of others.

“If only a dead man would go to them ---- they would see.” --- he pleases.

Picking it up at verse 27 from Luke's gospel today ---

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

‘No father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

‘He said to them’ ---- and this is Jesus speaking here now ---

“He said to them ‘if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

In other words it's not proof that they need --- it's far greater than just a need for proof that could ever possibly lead them to faith.

Rather it's a complete turn around --- a reversal.

Just as it took a complete reversal for the rich man to have his eyes opened.

It's only after he and Lazarus effectively change places in the after life ---- and he finds himself in agony instead of luxury ---- that the rich man ever

considers that maybe he got it all wrong and finally listens as God speaks to him through Abraham.

Listening can sometimes be the hardest thing in life --- particularly if the message we get or how we get the message isn't all that agreeable to us.

There are a number of great memes going around Facebook and other social media sites.

And a meme for those of you who aren't familiar with the term is ---- a humorous image, video, or piece of text, etc. that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users.

So there are all kinds of little images and pictures kicking around in cyber space about listening --- and some of them are quite good.

Here are a few examples of the better ones --- some of us have no doubt seen or heard some of them -----

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand --- they listen with the intent to reply.”

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Often true ---- too often true perhaps even.

And then there is this one ----

“When you talk you ---- you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen you may learn something new.”

And there's this one too --- “One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.”

Another is ----- “There's a difference between listening and waiting for your turn to speak.”

“There is a voice that doesn't always use words --- listen.”

“Listen first then listen more.”

“God gave us mouths that close and ears that don’t ---- that ought to tell us something.”

And of course there are many more as well.

I got a kick out of the peanuts one that has Lucy saying to Charlie brown ---  
“So what do you think Chuck.”

To which Charlie Brown says ---“What difference does it make anyway ---  
you never listen.”

To which Lucy replies -----“I was just making conversation.”

“When you make conversation you have to listen too.” --- Charlie brown  
says.

“You do?” ----- Lucy says in the final frame.

“To make conversation you have to listen too.”

I have to say the very first one is powerful --- “Most people do not listen  
with the intent to understand ---  
they listen with the intent to reply.”

Sometimes we are given answers that we don’t even know are answers ---  
simply because we fail to listen --- and are to intent on replying.

There’s the story of the man who after his town flooded sat on his roof just  
above the waterline ---- and after having been there for a number of days ---  
thought to himself ----- “Why hasn’t God answered my plea?”

Within hours of the flood reaching its highest point as the man stood on his  
roof --- a neighbour came by in his canoe and offered the man a life to dry  
ground.

“No” ----- he said --- “I think I’ll wait it out.”

A few hours later another more distant neighbour came by in a tin boat also  
offering transportation to dry ground --- “No thanks” ---- the man again said

--- “I think I’ll just hang in a while longer and see how fast the water goes down.”

And of course variations of this went on for the few days preceding the man coming to feel as though God had failed to answer him in his greatest need.

Never once did the man stop to think that maybe each and every boater that stopped was in fact the voice of God speaking.

He failed to listen --- partly because the answer he got wasn’t necessarily the one he wanted.

Sometimes when we listen to God --- we are asked to do some pretty radical things.

Jeremiah did what many considered to be the craziest thing of all ---- purchasing a piece of land in the midst of hostile takeover.

Buying ---- actually paying money for a field in the middle of a war zone ---- as the King of Babylon marched through Judah and besieged Jerusalem would have been absolutely laughable.

For those who hadn’t already dismissed Jeremiah --- the act of buying this field at this time --- certainly didn’t help his credibility.

And yet despite all appearances ----- Jeremiah does exactly what God directs him to do --- and he does it for the simple reason that he knew it was God who was speaking to him.

In verses 8 and 9 when his cousin Hanamel comes to him just as God directed Jeremiah recounts ---- “I knew that this was the word of the Lord so I bought the field...”

Forget about how it appeared --- forget about what people might think --- forget about the circumstances and social conditions --- forgetting about all of these things ---- Jeremiah acted because he knew that it was God who was speaking to him.

“I knew that this was the word of the Lord so I bought the field...”

And then in total contrast to Jeremiah there is the rich man in Luke's gospel.

One who doesn't hear God speaking at all --- and only ever does what He wants to do --- what will look good and be pleasurable with his rich friends -- connections --- and colleagues.

Jeremiah knows that if God so wills it there can and will be a great reversal.

Jeremiah knows that Babylon may look like they're coming out on top now -- but that this isn't the final picture --- God will turn things upside down before long.

He knows that if God is directing him to do something that could only ever make sense if there were a reversal of fortune --- than a reversal must be on its way ---- otherwise why would God ask such a thing.

And of course he is right.

Eventually God does restore His people and the Babylonian Empire falls ---- as every empire ultimately does.

In the most dire of circumstances there is this tiny but mightily powerful message of hope --- "Buy a piece of land now!" ---- God says ----- and Jeremiah listens --- and acts.

In contrast to this ---- in the most affluent and luxurious of circumstances God speaks to the rich man ---- having the poor beggar Lazarus gather at his gate reminding him of what the Lord requires of him ---

----to feed the hungry

--- clothe the naked

--- take in the outsider

--- preach good news to the poor

---- proclaim freedom for the prisoners

---- release the oppressed

----- proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

----- and love our neighbour --- love everyone we meet as much as we love ourselves

---- but the rich man never hears a word of this --- and so he does little to change the plight of the needy.

And so he changes nothing about how he lives --- he just ignores poor Lazarus and carries on day after day after day ---- never hearing anything new or different.

When Jesus says ---- “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets --- they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

He drives the point home that proof is not the chief obstacle to faith ----- misguided interests and corrupted concerns are.

The argument that if only God would give me some proof then I'd believe -- ---- or if only God would give me some evidence then I'd listen ---- is a load of hogwash.

God has already and is still already giving all the “proof and evidence” ----- the world could possibly ever need ----- the problem is ---- we're not always listening.

Thankfully there still are some Jeremiah's who do listen and do act.

The world is blessed with some pretty amazing and daring people who step out for God ----- and not just the obvious ones like Desmond Tutu or Oscar Romero ---- but nameless ones too --- ones in our lives and our neighbourhoods who quietly go about witness to God's saving love in Jesus Christ without any fanfare or profile.

But the great and powerful art of listening --- of actually listening to learn and grow and understand and have something revealed to us and not just listening as in not speaking waiting until we can speak and respond ---- seems to be losing ground.

The words ---- “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand --- they listen with the intent to reply.” --- is unfortunately too often true.

Listening to God means stepping outside of all the rest of the evidence of the world.

Listening to God means stepping out of our circumstances sometimes.

Listening to God often means being open to the unimaginable and the seemingly impossible.

What Jeremiah did ---- buying that field ---- at the precise time ---- would have been seen as impossible --- unimaginable --- he was being held in the court of the opposing King under lock and key don't forget --- the nation was at war and was losing badly.

But Jeremiah listened to God and did as God so directed even when what he was asked to do seemed outrageous --- impossible --- unimaginable.

Jeremiah listened ---- and he listened not just to respond to God ---- but to actually have God reveal something to him.

We always learn more when we listen.

I remember someone once said to me just before they died ---- “We need to listen more in life.”

And I knew by the way they said it they also meant that I needed to listen more --- and they were right.

We --- I ----- need to listen more.

Even those of us who are pretty good listeners ---- can still benefit from learning to be even better listeners.

We might say of someone “they talk too much” ---- but do we ever say --- “they listen too much”.

“They listen too much”.

Not likely.

Listening.

That's what the gospel is all about today.

Listening to and for the will of God.

And sometimes listening to God includes stepping out of our comfort zone and letting go of what we know or what we think we know.

Truly listening to God without any kind of assumption or prejudice or disposition that we think we already know what He is saying is one of the most profound and beautiful things we can ever do in this life.

It's really where everything good and true and faithful in this life begins ----- at the foot of the cross listening to God in humble submission.

It takes a profound amount of grace to check or wants ---- needs ----- prejudices ----- desires ----- and yearnings ---- and set them aside --- and truly listen to what God wants to reveal to us.

About a month ago --- the last Sunday in August --- the message was ---- "Marks of a Christian: Humility."

Well today we have another mark of a Christian ---- the ability to listen.

May God bless us with the ability to listen.

May we be far more like Jeremiah in his prophecy today that the rich man in Luke's gospel.

May our ear be open for revelation and not just confirmation of that which we already know.

May we listen with intent.

Not to reply --- not just to be polite --- not just to make conversation.

But may we listen with the hopes of learning.

May we listen with the drive to have something revealed to us that we never would have come to on our own.

God speaks continually.

Maybe not always with words but God is continually speaking.

Listening continually is a great and also a rarer and rarer art and gift.

Too often we only want to listen to what we want to listen to.

“Abraham replied ---- “They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them.”

“No father Abraham” he said “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.”

“He said to them if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets ----- they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

“He said to them if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets ----- they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

God always provides us with what we need to hear ---- we just need to listen.

Amen.