

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Doing the Will of God: Listening Like God
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Exodus 2:23-25; James 1:19-25

“Dad ... daad ... daaad! ... Dr. Judson!” “What?” Those words are one of the great stories of our family. Our daughter Katie, aged five at the time, was trying to get my attention, but I was mesmerized by my newspaper (remember those?), and I was not listening to her. That event always comes to my mind when I consider the difficulty of listening to others. It may be that you have never noticed the same thing ... how difficult it is to listen ... to listen to family, friends, or strangers. But for many of us we have become aware of how hard it is to listen when we are constantly bombarded with sounds, images, commercials, noise, and of course, our electronic devices. Our phones, computers, and iPads are constantly directing our attention to them and away from those to whom we ought to be listening. And the more ubiquitous those devices become, the more difficult it is to listen. Yet, I have to say that regardless of how hard it is to listen in our modern, busy, and noisy world it is still easier than listening like God listens.

It may be that few of us have ever taken the time to consider how God listens. We simply believe that God listens. But I want us to spend a few moments considering this idea ... and then I will later tell you why. So how does God listen? The answer can be found in our Exodus story that we read this morning. First, God listens to those who are in distress even when they do not cry out to God directly. What do I mean? If you look at the story, the Hebrews simply cry out. They don't cry out specifically to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; yet God hears them. God hears the cries of those in distress because of their bondage. Second, God's listening causes God to remember. Granted this can seem like a strange idea, God remembering as if God forgets. Yet, what it means is that the cries of the people caused God to remember God's commitments to them; that God had promised to bless them and to bless the world through them. Third, God's listening caused God to act. We know God acted on what God heard and on what God remembered because God would soon (in the story) begin the process of setting the people free. Why is knowing how God listens important? Because if we listen to James, he tells us that we are supposed to listen like God.

Listening like God forms the context for the part of James' letter we read this morning. I say this because James begins with the command, ***“Let everyone be quick to listen.”*** In other words, the members of Jesus' family are supposed to make **“listening”** their priority. Listening is supposed to help define who they are and what they do. Granted, over the centuries there have been a wide variety of ways in which this “listening” has been interpreted. Some have said it means listening to church leaders ... obviously put forward by church leaders. Others have said it means listening to God's word ... which would make sense, since the scriptures are central to the life of God's people. Others have said listening means listening directly to God ... again a good possibility since prayer was at the heart of the community. But I would argue that when James challenges people to listen, that he means is listening to those in distress, the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger, even when they do not cry out directly to us. I say this first because James is a good Messianic Jew, who is rooted and grounded in the stories of Torah which center on God listening not only to God's people but to those whom society forgets to care for. I say this second, because of where

James goes after calling people to listen ... he calls them to remember who they are to be ... the righteousness of God.

Immediately following James' command to listen he says that people are to be slow to speak or become angry because those two actions do not produce God's righteousness. God's righteousness in Jewish thought is not a codeword for personal moral perfection. It is instead a codeword for imitating God ... for following in God's way ... **for reflecting the character, covenant faithfulness, and righteousness of God into the world.** And if God's righteousness is listening to those in distress; those whom society oppresses or forgets, then listening is the way to achieve that. In the same thought, James says that we are to be slow to speak and slow to anger because they don't lead us into God's righteousness. This is so because speaking more than listening and being angry close off our ability to listen; they put the one speaking or being angry at the center of attention, rather than those to whom God's people are supposed to listen. This then reflects God's remembering ... that just as God's listening causes God to remember God's commitment to the Hebrew people, so too our listening is intended to cause us to remember our commitment to be God's righteousness in the world; to be those who care passionately about those who are in distress.

Finally, this listening and remembering, or listening producing righteousness, moves us to the final stage of listening, and that is action. James puts it this way, ***“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”*** For James, listening as God listens is supposed to lead not only to a remembering of our commitments to those on the margins, but to action that serves them; that attempts to offer them a piece of the social, economic, and religious pie. It is intended to bring shalom to all persons and not simply to those who are at the top of the economic heap. At this point though, James offers what to many seems like a strange idea ... that not being a doer is like looking into a mirror and forgetting rather than remembering. One way to think about this is to remember the last time you looked up how to do something on the internet. Then you waited a while before you tried to do it. And if you are like me, you have forgotten much of what you were supposed to do. On the other hand, if I were to do something immediately after seeing the instructions, I remember it much better the next time. In other words, doing something aids remembering how to do it. What James is trying to help us do is set up a positive feedback loop. We listen to the needs of those in distress, which leads to remembering our commitments to God, which leads to action, which leads to better listening, better remembering, more action and so on.

If we want to see how this works, all we need to do is look at our Matthew 25 initiative. We began by listening to the distress of our siblings of color. Then we remembered our commitments to be a community of love and justice. Then we began to act ... to be doers and not just hearers. I wish I could say that the voices of our siblings of color are the only ones crying out in distress. But I can't because all around us are voices crying out: the voices of our LGBTQIA+ siblings, and especially those in the Trans community, the voices of those dealing with depression and mental illness, the voices of those who are being evicted from their homes and apartments, those who are homeless and hungry. The voices are all around us. The question then becomes, will we listen, remember and act?

My challenge to us for this day then is this, to ask ourselves, am I listening like God, listening to those in this world who are crying out in distress, then remembering who I am and then acting to make a difference in their lives?