

June 12, 2016

Church Planting
Are You Listening?
Acts 16:6-10

Opening Words At the very heart of this morning's scripture lesson is the complex topic of communication. I want to say this clearly from the very beginning, God has never spoken to me verbally. However, God has spoken to me through my emotions and has nudged me in my spirit. I have no doubt that God has called me into the ministry, but it did not come with a verbal voice. It came in the form of contentment. The ministry is the only thing that really matters to me. Every other vocation seems pointless and small. In the ministry we don't just deal with the here and the now. You deal with eternity.

This is sermon number thirty-four in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. Do you remember my goal? I want to preach through the Book of Acts during the summer months. This is the fourth summer of this project and we have a long way to go. This summer we are looking at Paul's second missionary journey, and we are only in the sixteenth chapter of this twenty-eight-chapter book. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 16:5-10. I have called this message *Are You Listening?*

Acts 16:6-10 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Russell Wilson is a quarterback for the National Football League's Seattle Seahawks. In 2012, he was named the league's Rookie of the Year. In 2013, he led the Seahawks to their first Super Bowl victory. In 2014, he found himself positioned for another Super Bowl victory. It never happened, because of what some call the worst play selection in the history of the league. Do you remember the play? They have shown it countless times. With time running out, the Seahawks had the ball on the Patriots' one-yard line. Instead, of running it in, they passed. That pass was intercepted and Russell Wilson's Seahawks lost. This is where his story begins to speak to us. According to NBC Sports, Wilson said God spoke to him, verbally and directly, after the game. What did God say? God told him that interception was part of a divine plan. God wanted to see how Wilson would respond to the controversy.

Can I ask you three questions?

1. Do you believe God spoke to Russell Wilson?
2. Has God ever spoken to you?
3. Do you believe God is trying to communicate with us?

If you have answered those three questions, say, "**Amen!**" Let's look at this morning's scripture lesson together.

This morning we find ourselves once again in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. In the previous chapter, Paul and Barnabas had separated. The conflict circled around John, also called Mark. When the two separated, Barnabas teamed up with John. Paul teamed up with Silas. Last week, we were told Paul needed more help, so he enlisted Timothy.

This week's words are hard to understand because we know little about that area's geography. The reading begins in frustration. It will have to suffice to say that Paul, Silas and Timothy failed to enter several areas. However, by the end of the reading we discover God does have a plan for them. When they arrived in the seaport of Troas, God communicated to Paul through a vision. What is a vision? It is the experience of seeing something or someone while in a trance. Paul saw a man starving in Macedonia. Some believe that starving man was Luke himself, the author of this book. Regardless, Paul got the message. In the morning, the text says Paul got up and traveled to Macedonia. At the very heart of this simple story is the complex word, *communication*. Paul's ministry went nowhere until God communicated with him. Our ministry will go nowhere until God communicates with us. Communicating with God is vital in ministry, if you want to succeed.

Did you know the Bible actually contains nine different ways that God communicates with us? This is the list. God communicates with us:

1. Through the scriptures
2. Through the Holy Spirit
3. Through fellow believers
4. Through the audible voice of God
5. Through dreams
6. Through angels
7. Through circumstances
8. Through hardship
9. Through visions

The question is not, is God is communicating with us? The question is, are we listening? If you hear what I am trying to say, say, "**Amen!**"

What is preventing you from hearing God? God is constantly trying to communicate with us, but His words are falling on deaf ears. The problem is not our ears. According to the United States census, only 2.2% of Americans are deaf and only 2.1% of Ohioans are deaf. The solution to our problem does not include an audiologist. The problem is not completely that we are bad people. You know the truth. We have our

fair share of pride and narrowness, but we are sincere. This is a bigger issue. The major reason we have a hard time hearing God is that we are too preoccupied to listen. Our lives are so crowded that we have no time for God. He simply isn't a priority. Just think about it for a moment. You will discover it is true. It is one of the prices we pay for living in our society. Let me ask you this question:

Is anyone here preoccupied with your **reservations**? In other words, are you preoccupied with your problems? There is no shortage of problems or worries in our society. Research tells us we are worried about all kinds of things. We are worried about growing older and our health. We are worried about our finances and our job security. We are worried about our wrinkles and our physique. We are worried about not looking attractive. (I worry I am too attractive. 😊) Is anybody here worried about your pet's health or the future of your neighborhood? What do you worry about in the middle of the night? How much time do you spend worrying? How much time do you spend thinking about God?

Emotionally, our worries pull us in different directions and pull us away from God. You have heard it a million times. Faith ends where worries begin. Our worries pull us so far away from God it is impossible to hear God. Our worries have crowded him out. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" That leads me to my next question.

Is anyone here preoccupied with **responsibility**? Our lives are full of responsibilities. The other day, it was reported that the best part of going on vacation was planning the trip. I believe that is true. The trip itself is a great deal of work, but the planning of the trip is very little work. When you plan your trip, you dream of carefree days without any responsibility. Can I be honest with you? I have grown weary of being responsible for everything.

It is one of my great character flaws. I am tired of defending our youth. It would be nice to see them in worship occasionally. I am tired of defending parents who have decided sports is more important than church. I am tired of defending the size of our church. We are too big to know everyone, yet we are not a megachurch. (Please don't put your bulletin on my desk from the megachurch you visited this summer. It just makes me feel guilty. I am a one-man show.) I am tired of searching for the perfect temperature and I am tired of searching for the perfect sound level. I am tired of feeling like a success or a failure based on the treasurer's report and our latest attendance numbers. I am tired of updating your latest email address and I am sorry your birthday is wrong. I am tired of trying to keep every group and every person happy. I am sorry that the air conditioner in the fellowship hall doesn't work again. I am tired of feeling responsible for someone leaving this church because one of you treated them wrong. Do I have to go on? There is no other way to say it, I am tired of responsibility. I went into the ministry to serve God, but there is no time left for God. I have become preoccupied with responsibility.

Have you become preoccupied with responsibility? I am not just talking about church, I am talking about your life, your job, your home, your children, your parents. Would it be nice to have some "me time"? If there is no time left for you, then there is even less time left for God. No wonder God has a hard time communicating with us. Our responsibilities have crowded him out. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, I was in Florida during the fall. On Sunday morning, I decided to go to a church. I like going to church where I am not responsible. I will be honest with you. I picked the closest church. I don't remember what tribe it belonged to. I do remember the service, because it was great. The music was fine and the prayers were sincere. The message was well thought out and powerfully delivered. The whole service fed my soul and I didn't want it to end. When the benediction was given I just stood there trying to absorb the last ounces of the Holy Spirit. When I opened my eyes to leave, a man walked up to me and said, "Do you think the Dolphins will win today?" He missed the whole thing because he was preoccupied with recreation.

Is anyone here preoccupied with their **recreation**? There is nothing wrong with recreation. With all of our responsibilities, we need some recreation. In the past few days I have watched the Penguins and the Cavs. I have stayed up late to watch the Indians on the west coast. There is nothing wrong with recreation, until it starts pushing God out. How much time do you spend on your hobbies? How much time do you spend trying to listen to God? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" It is not enough to just know the problem. We must solve the problem. Isn't it time we made God a priority again?

Tomorrow afternoon, I will leave for Annual Conference. A lot of things happen at Annual Conference. There will be a memorial service for those who have died in the past year. We will honor those people who are retiring, including our Resident Bishop, John Hopkins. We will pray for those who are being ordained and consecrated, who are beginning their ministries. We will hear all the reports from the various conference committees and offices. I am confident we will get a surplus of information about General Conference and Jurisdictional Conference. However, the saddest moment of Annual Conference, in my opinion, is the moment the list of names of churches that are closing is read. There is always a moment of silence to remember them. Once proud ministries are gone. Some of those buildings will be sold. Other buildings will be repurposed. In many cases, the buildings will remain a shadow of their former selves, locked to never be opened again. When I came to East Ohio, there were approximately 850 churches. Now we are well under 800. At the present rate, that number will drop greatly in the next ten years.

Did you know the United Methodist Church has been dying since 1957? During that year, 57% of all Americans belonged to a church. That number has dropped to well under 50%. If you don't believe me, just look at how our district has changed in the past twenty years. Some churches have closed. Some churches have yoked with other

churches. No one seems to know just why. There are a lot of reasons for our demise. You can say we fell in love with a certain style of worship, which no longer speaks to our informal society. In our area, you can blame the drop in our population base. Or maybe our problem is more basic? Maybe we are struggling as a denomination in this area for the same reason Paul struggled in the scripture lesson. Paul struggled until God finally communicated with him. We will continue to struggle until God finally communicates with us. Could it be we are more concerned about being heard than we are about listening? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

This story is well documented. On June 7, 2014, comedian Tracy Morgan was involved in a six-car traffic accident on the New Jersey Turnpike. One person died; Morgan's friend and collaborator James McNair. Morgan was lucky. He found himself in a coma. He said, "You don't die for a few weeks and then come back to normal, trust me. Something's going to be missing, something's going to be gained—you just got to live your life after that. But after surviving something like that, I'm probably never going to feel normal. I went to the other side." Morgan said while he was in that coma God spoke to him. What did God say to Tracy Morgan? Morgan said that God said, *"Your room ain't ready. I still have something for you to do."* Do you believe that God spoke to Tracy Morgan? Do you believe that God is trying to communicate with us? The best question is, are you listening?

Will you pray with me?