

# Read My Lips

Message #6 in the series "Beyond Hurt"

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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As we prepare for God's word, would you join with me in prayer?

Gracious, Heavenly Father, open us up to your word and open your word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn Lord, as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. All of this Father, we pray in Jesus' name and all God's people said, Amen.

It's good for us to share in this word of God, it is really a privilege to share this word. It's a powerful word in the midst of a sermon series that we have been doing called Beyond Hurt. Now this great gift that we have been given in God's word reminds us that there is always an opportunity for us to go deeper in our relationships with one another, always an opportunity for us to share the heartbeat of who we are in Christ. Now, the witness, as we have been learning throughout the past several weeks, our witness as a people of faith is highly dependent on our oneness. So, how do we get to that place of being one, especially in the midst of a season, of a time within our culture where maybe we're not all one, maybe we're more different and more diverse, or maybe we're stuck in disagreements way too often for us to be one.

What does it mean to be one? And what does it mean for us as we testify by our treatment of one another? What does it mean for that oneness to tell the rest of the world that we are in fact followers of Jesus Christ who calls us to the same table? What does that look like for us? And So, Beyond Hurt is a series that's looking at how do we build on those relationships with one another? How do we get through the times and seasons of our disparity, of our disagreements? How do we get beyond the pain that Sometimes inevitably, whether intentionally or unintentionally, we end up offending one another?

So, you've heard me say this many times over the years, I'm a firm believer that whenever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there's bound to be a fight, right? The harsh reality is Jesus brings us to the table, but Sometimes Jesus causes us to be in conflict with each other, and sometimes that conflict impacts us as the body of faith called the church. We have by virtue of the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, been called to be a community, a new community called the church, and that community is defined by love. This is the primary language of the new community. It's the language of love. The community of faith, called the church were to be fluent in this language called love.

Now, fluency and love, what does that look like? What does it look like? Well, we have a word from God's word that helps define love a little bit more. This is from I John Chapter 3:16. First John. Now most of us remember John 3:16. It's the same author, and I think it's more than just a coincidence that I John 3:16 kind of links to John 3:16. And this is what the same guy, the same dude who wrote the Gospel of John is writing this letter to John, and this is what he says,

***"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."***

Hmm, interesting. The dynamic of this verse has a context. This verse's context is really important. John the Apostle is writing these words to a young church, a young dynamic church, a church made up of people who are struggling in the midst of a season of major persecution. For John, the writer of the Gospel, as well as these letters, there are two types of people. There are the people of the light and the people of the dark. And so, he's calling us to be the people of the light. And so, we need to remember that context that in the midst of the challenge of being light and dark, we need to choose to live as people of the light. Now, the people of the light were being persecuted by the people of the dark. So, in that persecution being united, being one was critically important. And So, John writes these words, we know what real love is because we saw it modeled for us in how Jesus gave up his life for us. So, since Jesus modeled it, since Jesus taught it, we need to live it. We need to choose to live as people of the light.

Hmm. So, what is this not about? In our culture today, there are way too many individuals who claim to be people of faith who use scripture to control people, or they use scripture to abuse people. That's not what this is about. There are individuals, specifically more men than women who are using scripture to abuse other people that are close to them. "Do it my way. Because that's what the Bible says." That's not what the Bible says. So, the context of giving your life for someone else is not about abuse. It's not about being a martyr, even by today's standards. And by that, I'm talking about the individual that says, "All right, I'm always giving up stuff, So, I might as well give up this as well." That's being a martyr. That's not. It's not truly living out what the scripture is saying.

No, what the scripture is saying here and what John is trying to get at is that what Jesus modeled, needs to draw us to make a priority of putting the other person ahead of ourselves. That's a volitional choice. It's a choice because we want to honor what Jesus himself has done. Keep that in mind, because when we talk about taking things the next level in our conversation in this sermon series, we need to focus back on Matthew, 18. Matthew, 18, is Jesus's actual teaching on how to have those relationships, especially when we disagree. And last week, we started in verse 15, where Jesus said to his disciples,

***"If your brother or sister sins go and point out their fault just between the two of you, if they listen to you, you have won them over."***

And last week we talked a little bit about the word sins about missing the mark and so, building off of that, there's an important phrase here, and that's the phrase "you have won them over." So, the goal in any kind of confrontation is really very significantly, to first pursue reconciliation and restoration. What does reconciliation and restoration look like? It means that we are going to navigate through the times of our disagreement, hoping that when we need to confront somebody who is in sin, who is missing the mark, our goal is not to be right, but to reconcile. That's our goal. It's not to be right. But to reconcile, to restore, to connect them back to the heart of God or to the heart of the individuals that are in dispute. So, if that's our goal, we need to look at the first part of that phrase. And that's what I want to focus in on today.

So, if your brother or sister sins go and point out their fault just between the two of you, it's going direct rather than the circuitous route. If they listen to you? If they listen to you, then you have a great thing as they listen to you then the restoration process is really going to be easy. There's reconciliation that potentially is at work there. But what do you do if they don't? Listening is the challenge, isn't it? And we live in a time where when we have a lot of people speaking, a lot of people, a lot of opinions out there, if you doubt that, just check out social media. Yeah, right? Everybody's got a tweet their opinion, everybody's got a post a Facebook opinion, and their opinion, of course, is right. Right? Of course, you could say the same thing about what I just said. It's kind of challenging for us to be a people as followers of Jesus, to be a

people who actually focus on listening, who focus on understanding rather than being understood first. And listening is hard work.

I'm remembering a humorous story about a wife who interrupted her husband's football game watching, stood in front of the TV, and looked at her husband and said, "you're not listening to me." And the husband going, "that's a strange way to begin a conversation." Think about it. He missed entirely everything that she had said prior to that moment. So, for her to interrupt that plane of noise. Was to make him connect to the fact that she had already been speaking. Do we do that? What is that challenge that we focus in on that demands that we listen first? It is scriptural. In James 1:19, James, the brother of Jesus, says,

***"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."***

Quick to listen. Slow to speak. Slow to become angry or if we needed something a little bit more current, more modern, there's the Native American proverb that said, "Listen, or your tongue will keep you deaf." Think about that for a second. "Listen, or your tongue will keep you deaf." Or as the anonymous, I don't know if Somebody just didn't want to take responsibility for this or not, but Somebody said once, "No one is listening until you make a mistake." Isn't that true of our culture today? But nobody's listening unless you violate what Somebody else thinks is their priority and then all of a sudden, not only are they listening, but the whole world is listening, and that principle right there has caused the surge. That we call closed culture. Cancel culture.

It's a really interesting dilemma that we face. But Matthew 18:15, ultimately leads to verse 16.

***"But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, So, that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'"***

What this is really it's an invitation for us to continue staying focused on the priority of restoration and reconciliation, and this in my mind, is a form of what we would call today, an intervention. This is an intervention. It's an invitation for us to try to bring a couple of other individuals who have the same heart for the other individual, bringing out the best in that individual to reconnect them to the heart of God and to the hearts of those that are in dispute. What do we do if they won't listen? You know, the reality is that communication requires both a sender and a receiver. Right? We all know that.

Humorously, there are times in my ministry where I've had individuals, not So, much in this church, but in a prior church. I've had them come to me saying, "Pastor, you all have a real significant communication problem." I said, "So, what makes you say that?" And this person said, "Well, all of these things are happening in the church, and I never heard anything about them going on. What's with that?" And so, I looked at the individual and I said, "Can you help me to understand something? We post all of this on our newsletter. Do you read the newsletter?" "Well, no," they said, and So, I said, "we would print them in our bulletins every week. Did you read the church bulletin?" "Well, no." "We send them out as an e-note in an email every week and all of the information is there. Are you getting the e-mail?" "Oh, I get it, but I don't read it." "And so, what you're telling me is that we're sending a bunch of information, but you're not receiving them. So, where exactly is the communication problem?" And to this person's credit, they said, "I guess it's with me." I was like, "yeah." That's right, because a sender can send all they want, but if the receiver is not receiving it, there's no communication and therein lies part of the problem.

Whenever there's a dispute if there's no one on the receiving side you don't have communication. You don't have dialog. And how do you get restoration without communication and dialog? So, when you look at it from that vantage point, what prevents us from listening to one another? What prevents us? First of all, we can't get beyond whatever our brokenness is, So, sometimes we don't listen because we can't get beyond our pain or need to be right or our need to control the outcome of the situation. Or maybe we're too insecure. Maybe we can't get beyond our insecurity. Whatever it is, we can't get beyond that's preventing us from opening our ears to hear.

Sometimes we can't hear because we're conflict avoiders. Maybe we're afraid of what we'll hear, So, we just shut down. Right? You ever see that, you know, somebody comes to you, and they say, "well, we have to talk" and you immediately go, "Oh, I don't want to hear it. No, no, I don't want to hear it. No, but I want to hear it." It's because we're afraid of whatever it is that we might hear. Then there's we just don't really care. Has that been true for anybody? I don't want to listen to you because I just don't care. I don't care about your opinion. I don't care what you have to say. Maybe it's as strong as I think I deserve whatever it is that I'm doing. Don't tell me I'm wrong. I just don't care what you think.



Or maybe we don't listen because we're defensive. So, we blame other people. We're just wired to be defensive. You know what being defensive is, right? Being defensive is when we're insecure and self-protective, So, we actually try to justify our behavior. That's what being defensive is all about. Or insecure. And so, any time you see a defensive person or a person who is defending themselves is because they feel insecure, they feel attacked, or they feel that it's Somebody else's problem because they just can't take responsibility for themselves. When we expose that then we're going to get a reaction of shut down.

Hmm. Are we listening? Are we taking the opportunity to listen? You know, it's been almost two years now of wearing masks within many of our public sectors. And I finally got to a place where I can understand. I understand now what the teachers of Charlie Brown and Linus are saying now. Right? And understanding, listening is a hardship. And when we dare to listen, we just might, we might learn something. So, what we must do is we have to create a safe place for the other person to hear, especially when we're confronting them, which is the essence of Matthew 18. When we're going before them to do an intervention, to somehow get them to see what they're doing is taking them off their trajectory of the relationship with Jesus or that what they're doing is negatively impacting the oneness of the church. So, in order for them to hear us, in order for them to listen, we have to create a safe place for that to occur. How do we do that? So, creating a safe place from my vantage point really begins with prayer. Begins with prayer. We must get to that place where, first and foremost, we take the situation before the Lord, why is this important? Because Jesus reminds us, you know, reminds the disciples he reminds us that before we go after the speck in the other person's eye, we got to take the log out of our own. And so, we have to we have to approach this prayerfully. It could be that maybe we're not right. Right, imagine that. It could be that the other person is simply living out something in their story and we need to begin to understand that. That understanding comes through what the Holy Spirit can give to us. And so, we need to pray asking for the Holy Spirit's wisdom and discernment and prayer needs to lead us to then ask.

You know, one of the phrases that I use all the time is, "Hey," and you can quote me on this next time you're in a situation, except with me, all right, because I'll know what you're doing. So, here's the phrase I use, "hey, can you help me understand what's going on? Can you help me understand why you did this? Can you help me understand?" Rather than, "hey, when you did this, this this?" Because we don't know. Maybe what we must do is just start asking questions. Why is this important? You've heard me say this many times over the years. Behind every behavior, there's a story. Right?

Several years ago, Kristine and I went on vacation to the Pacific Northwest, and to get from Point A to point B, we had to put our car onto a ferry and then take the ferry through the San Juan islands and get to the other place where we were going. And you know, this particular day, normally I like going to the front of the boat to see where I'm going, and I love doing that. I love just getting that perspective. But the weather was really very blistery and cold. It was a cold, rainy day in the midst of the summer, and so, being on the front end was hard. It was really horrible. And so, I went to the back end and I noticed something very unique at the back end. So, when you look at where the boat the ferry has been, what you begin to see is what's called the wake. The wake. Every boat does this on water. Some are more pronounced, that wake. And as I looked at the wake of this ferry, I could see the trajectory of where we started just by watching the wake of the water. Our behaviors are just like that. If we pause and simply ask, we could see the wake, we can see the story that led to the behavior. If we just deal with the behavior and hear me, I know that sometimes that's what you have to do, but if we just focus on the behavior, we will miss the real source of the behavior. And the source becomes the important critical factor in this journey of reconciliation. Pray, ask, listen.

If the person's story has some valid clues, we will not gain those clues unless we listen. And you know what listen looks like today? It means, not putting your phone on the table in front of you while you're talking with Somebody. That is a pet peeve of mine. Any time I have a time with somebody, and their phone goes on the table in front of them face up, and every time a text happens, or a message happens, or a call happens, they're immediately distracted. That's not listening. If you want my attention, you've got it. Would you give it as well?

Listen. Empathize. This is really critical, and it goes to the place that at the foot of the Cross of Christ, we're all equal in our need of God's grace. So, rather than viewing this passage of scripture as a permission to judge, as Pastor John said just two weeks ago, "every measure that we use to judge another person will be used to judge us." Judge, not. Does not mean that we don't put boundaries around. Boundaries are important. But let's begin to empathize by connecting our story with their story.

Finally, speak with love. Whether it's setting a boundary or whether it's inviting them to reconsider whatever it is, let our focus be love. Ultimately, we serve a god of the impossible. So, let's believe that God can do whatever God wants to do in that person's life or in the life of this congregation. Soft Dancer Proverbs says Soft Dancer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Jesus continues, if they still refuse to listen. Notice the emphasis on the word refuse. Tell it to the church, and by that, it's not announce it on a Sunday morning. It's bring in some representation from the church to the pastors or church leaders to try to help in that process of mediation. And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. In the olden days, what did that mean? It meant excommunicate them. I think that's a misrepresentation of this verse. Why? Because what did Jesus do with pagans and tax collectors? He had dinner with them. He invited them. He invited them into his life. He invited them to follow. So, what we have to do is we have to keep in mind that God's agenda is always invitational. It may mean that we set boundaries on the behavior while we figure out how to love the person. Hmm.



Dick Cavett, do you remember Dick Cavett? Old television interviewer, he once said "it's a rare person who wants to hear what he doesn't want to hear." Interesting. Proverbs says "a fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing their opinion." I can guarantee you when we listen, we may just discover the story that sets people free. Let's put our witness to the forefront and let our oneness tell the world that we're followers of Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Lord God, we thank you for the great gift of your word. It is indeed a challenge. A challenge for us to be one, especially when we disagree. So, hold us together, Lord,

hold us by the passionate plea of the Cross of Christ. That all of what we do may honor you. In Jesus name. Amen.