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Sermon

Two Ears to Hear With

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John 4

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Imagine you are on a yacht in the middle of a storm, being driven close to some rocks at the foot of a large lighthouse. You and the rest of the crew are washed overboard and are fighting for your lives. Suddenly a powerful swimmer is beside you and helps you to safety.

As you recover on the rocks you realise that other people are out there needing help and powerboats and life buoys are available to rescue them. Do you turn around and go back to help or ignore them and enjoy the benefits of dry land?

Today's sermon is the first in a series to help you find the courage and skills to launch into the deep. There are people outside these doors who have no way of finding the hope and peace that Jesus offers – unless we go out and tell them. They stand in danger of eternally perishing unless we do.

God loves every person, and does not want anyone to perish¹. Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost². He has saved us and we are now on his team! But what does the team do? In Matthew 28:18-19, we find Jesus' description of our mission.

1. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." - so we share the gospel, they respond, and we baptise them.
2. We then teach them to obey Jesus' teachings (ie basic discipleship).

Sounds simple in theory, but in practice, the challenge comes when people seem disinterested. What is going on?

As Peter Lloyd said a few Sundays ago, every person in our country is affected by their education, upbringing and the media in other words, the prevailing Western culture. Western culture is now totally coloured by post-modernism.

Post-modernism simply means 'after the modern era'.

The modern era was the optimistic time from the industrial revolution onwards, during which our culture believed humans would find the answers to our problems. Medical scientists would find a cure for cancer;

¹ 2 Peter 3:9

² Luke 19:10

economists would bring wealth; we'd find a way to 'reprogram' drug addicts and criminals, preachers offered answers to life; the welfare state would take care of the poor³, governments and the United Nations Organisation would end war. Then all these confident promises failed.

As a result:

1. People became sceptical of such "truth claims."
2. People rejected moral absolutes (having discarded belief in God, there is no basis for a fixed definition of morals).
3. People became indifferent toward religion believing it's not really true. If you share the gospel, they might respond: 'I'm really glad you've found something that works for you! For me –I've got my own beliefs' or 'You've got your truth –and I've got mine.'

So how do you share Christ with such people? How do you tell the truth to someone who does not believe 'truth' exists? You can't – it's logically self defeating. So ... you converse with them about it! This is what this sermon series is about. Let's look at how Jesus reached out to the Samaritan woman.

He was an expert in conversation. His first question was "Will you give me a drink?" With that question, he cut across convention and cultural expectations to open up an opportunity to reach her.

He talked about "living water". This was a common idiom at the time, meaning running water (such as a stream) and it aroused her interest. But she was quite feisty, defensive and confrontational, verbally sparring with Jesus. Just seeing him in his Jewish clothing would have reminded her of the scorn of the Jewish male establishment towards Samaritans and women.

Jesus started small. Sometimes we think our small conversations in the course of the day don't matter and maybe consider 'small talk' a waste of time. It's not. It's a way to get to 'big' talk. And questions are the key to significant conversations.

This is not easy for me personally. I grew up with the belief in my family that to ask questions is prying into other people's affairs – we didn't do that in our family! So I understand completely if you find it hard. But Jesus started off in a very mundane way – asking the woman for help.

A startling thing about the Samaritan story is that while she was challenging Jesus⁴ in a "Prove this to me" way, he cut across the conversation with a "Word of Knowledge" given to him by God. "You've had 5 husbands..." How did he know that?!? Here is a model for us of how a spiritual conversation can be. Jesus was listening to God with one ear and to the woman with the other ear.

This ability to tap into the knowledge of God is not just something only God Incarnate could do. Remember, when he came to earth, he laid aside his majesty and his privileges as God so he needed the help of the Holy Spirit just as we do. He modelled it for us. So we also need listen with one ear to God and the other ear to the person just as Jesus did. God can drop information in to our minds that has a way of opening things up.

We can expect God to help us as we engage people in conversation. Sometimes when you are just starting it helps to take a friend along who is sensitive spiritually. I don't feel very good at hearing God in this way. Ian is better at it than I am, so I like going out with him. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two for very good reasons. Last year, when Ian and I were in America, we joined in a street outreach with a local church. I was paired with a young man who felt God had given him some clues as to which person to talk to. As we went out, I followed the promptings of God which got the two of us into a certain place at a certain time and a man turned up who fitted three of the words of knowledge that Josh had been given. I was not given the words of knowledge, I just helped Josh get to the right place.

Two are better than one. As we operate together, it's as if we were the net Jesus casts out to catch fish. No strand can do it alone, but together, we can be useful to Jesus in His fishing.

³ poverty is as bad in USA today as before the welfare state

⁴ see v12

And as we go out two by two, we still don't have to do it by ourselves. The Holy Spirit promises to help us. Jesus said "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."⁵ We hear his voice through Scripture or just by the quiet inner voice of the Spirit we hear in our minds. The whole point of Jesus sending the Spirit at Pentecost is so that we become empowered for his mission⁶.

His mission is simply to love people. Jesus comes with the power of his love. Those who came to the Treasure Hunt last night saw that demonstrated with power. We went out onto the streets and into the Plaza to share the love of Christ. At the end of the night, I had seen 7 legs lengthened and many people encouraged and touched by the love of Jesus.

All we had to do was be available for God to use us, not be clever with words.

A 'hearing' conversation such as we heard in John 4 is one with the purpose of understanding what might be hindering anyone from talking about spiritual truth.

We ask general questions and listen for clues, then we ask them more specific questions in those areas.

For example – the 'sour note'

If we're listening to a vocal quartet, and someone sings out of tune, you can hear it –and the choir master needs to pick up on it to correct it. In the same way, when you're in a conversation and someone says something that doesn't seem right, if we can pick up on it, it can become a doorway for meaningful conversation.

When the Samaritan woman challenged Jesus – "Sir, give me this water." Then Jesus came in with an amazing word of knowledge about her marital history, but she went off on a tangent about arguments between Jews and Samaritans. He answers not with an argument but with a word of wisdom, steering her away from old prejudices and arguments to talking about a higher spiritual reality.

Too many times, I have heard such "sour notes" and let them pass because it seemed too intrusive or confrontational to oppose the person's ideas. I felt like the Arctic River – frozen at the mouth. If you feel like that and you would like to thaw out, you might like to read something I wrote some time ago on the subject. Feel free to take one from the welcome desk.

One of the sour notes we might hear in a conversation is "How can God be real when there is so much evil in the world?" It is useful to think through this sort of comment, before we have to converse about it. Consider the following:

1. For humans to recognise something as evil, there must be some good around or what we call evil would just be normal and all that exists. Therefore both good and evil exist. You could ask the question "Do you think God is the source of both good and evil?"
2. If they assume that God is responsible for evil, they are probably unaware of the amazing answer that Christianity offers about the problem of evil and suffering. These are global problems, and when answers are compared, Christianity is the only religion that provides dependable hope.⁷

You could ask such questions as

1. What do you mean by evil? Where do you get that definition from? Why do you blame God for it?
2. Do you think any other religion has a better explanation?
3. Has it occurred to you that you might not yet understand what the Bible says about evil and suffering?
4. Could I share how I understand this?

⁵ John 10:27

⁶ Acts 1:8

⁷ Islam's hope isn't 'dependable' in the sense that they have limited assurance of salvation. Their definition of the hope of heaven is also considerably different, their heaven including men getting many wives & women's continued subservience.

You might need to consider that the person's comments may be emotionally motivated. You could ask:

"You seem to feel strongly about this. Why is that?" Maybe they recently faced a tragedy, in which case they need compassion while going through the pain.

The point is : if we don't first listen to the person to truly hear the 'sour notes' we'll not know what to ask.

And if we don't ask we'll never know what they really believe in the first place, let alone why. We will have missed a very real opportunity – because talking about the meaning of suffering indicates someone thinking about spiritual things.

As a second example, the topic of prophecy comes up. Someone says bluntly, "It's all fabricated anyway!"

What are the 'sour notes'?

- Disbelief in Scripture as being true, authoritative and relevant.
- Ignorance of outstanding evidence for the Bible's reliability, and the prophecies which have been proven to be fulfilled.

The questions one could ask:

- What do you mean "fabricated?" / In what way is it fabricated?
- What led you to that conclusion? / Where did you get that idea from?
- Are you aware that the evidence regarding these prophecies is as strong as any evidence you'll ever see for any ancient document?⁸

In 2 Cor 4:4 Paul says "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ..."

So it's their minds that are blinded! It's in their thinking! In their beliefs, and the way they see the world, and the way they see God. By asking questions, we can find out what their blind-spots are.

In summary:

One of the reasons people don't cotton on to our faith is because we haven't been giving them reasons to believe it!

If a person believes something is important they talk about it. Last week, I rang a friend to say "Hey. Those coffee granules you use are on a super-special at the Salvation Army HQ! You only pay \$2 and that money you pay is donated to their food-bank! It's a win/win situation!"

In just the same way, we can gossip the Gospel. It's a win/win situation!

So I have some suggestions for you to prepare for significant conversations:

1. What about investigating the reasons for your faith? Knowledge is important to help you ask wise questions
2. Start talking more with people around you, asking questions, and listening carefully.

As Jesus did in His conversation with the Samaritan woman

- a. During conversations, pray for God's input, and listen for the Holy Spirit's promptings
- b. Take risks for God, and see what He will do. He wants to work in partnership with you!

The fields are ripe, and our opportunity is limited. How many times have you moved house or jobs, and left behind neighbours or colleagues with whom you never spoke about Jesus? We've all done it. The point is

⁸ The New Testament is the most well-attested and 'verified' ancient document on our planet today. Copies of predictions that Jesus fulfilled are provably written prior to Him, e.g. in the Qumran Scrolls or the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made in 250BC.

this: Our opportunities can be short lived. So let's make an effort to encourage faith in others. Asking questions to initiate and engage in conversations is an easy place to start. Let's partner with Jesus and get the rescue boats launched.

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