

Sunday 19 February 2017

Otumoetai Baptist Church

Activating God Space: Listening to God and others

John 4

(SLIDE – Where have you noticed God at work this week?)

Welcome to the third week of our series on Godspace. For those who have been away or those who need a refresher:

- God space is all about finding the space within us and around us, so that we can **notice** where God is at work.
- God space is that space in which we “wonder” about God, and we even doubt about God.
- God space is our awareness toward what God is doing in our lives and the lives of people around us.

Do you remember the circle image? The image of a church holding hands in unity, but facing outwards into the community to engage with the community, the not-yet Christians.

The goal of this series is to get us to think, what if we as a church remain connected to each other, because that's really important, we've got to stay connected to each other and support each other and help each other through hard times, but what if we turned outward, what if we were an outward-focused church where things that we did were for the benefit of those who are not in the circle.

It's said the church is the only organisation that exists purely for the benefit of those that are not part of the circle. It exists so that other people might be introduced to Jesus and His message of love can be shared with people who are not part of this circle.

A big part of this is through listening. Listening to God and listening to others.

What would it mean if we recognised the Godspace in our lives, went out of our way to engage with the not-yet Christians that God has placed there, and took the time to truly **listen** to God and to them...?

That's the focus this morning. Let's start with a story that shows the importance of listening.

A woman's dishwasher stopped working so she called a repairman. Since she had to go to work the next day, she told the repairman, "I'll leave the key under the mat. Fix the dishwasher, leave the bill on the counter, and I'll pay online."

"Oh, by the way don't worry about my bulldog Spike. He won't bother you. But, whatever you do, do NOT, under ANY circumstances, talk to my parrot!" "I REPEAT, DO NOT TALK TO MY PARROT!!!"

(SLIDE 2)

When the repairman arrived at the apartment the following day, he discovered the biggest, meanest-looking bulldog he had ever seen. But, just as she had said, the dog just lay there on the carpet watching the repairman go about his work.

The parrot, however, drove him nuts the whole time with his constant yelling, swearing and name calling.

Finally the repairman couldn't contain himself any longer and he yelled, "Shut up, you stupid, ugly bird!" To which the parrot replied, "Get him, Spike!"

You can probably picture that scene. Listening to others is essential.

(SLIDE 3)

Doug Pollock, the author of the book we're basing our series on tells the story of how he was invited to speak in a medium-sized Midwestern town in the United States about what Godspace is and how it works.

Doug and his team arrived a day early to speak to the church leadership and ensure everything was set up for the next day. Over dinner that night, the church's outreach director asked Doug what he was going to be talking about the next day.

This was a golden opportunity for Doug to dazzle them with what

he's found out so far about Godspace and go through a bullet-point presentation of what they can expect. But Doug doesn't do any of this, instead he makes a suggestion.

Doug suggests they drop in to a local bar. Yep, the local pub. For us, that would be Cruzaz Bar and Gaming, just outside our church doors to the right. I considered dropping in to the bar in preparation for today as well, but I haven't got there yet. Working up the courage, you might say.

So, back to our story, Doug, the church outreach director and a guy named Anthony, who was accompanying Doug on the speaking trip, all walk into the country bar called 'Stepping Out' on a Friday night. Doug recalls that they were definitely stepping out of place and out of their comfort zone.

Here we have Doug, a white guy in his late 40's – old enough to be the father of most of the clientele; the outreach director a white guy in his sixties – old enough to be their grandfather; and Anthony, an African-American guy in his mid-30's – and possibly the first and last African American to step foot in this bar, as the town had very few African Americans in it.

Quite the trio indeed, as you can surely imagine.

Everything in Doug was screaming for him to turn around and call it a night so he could be fresh for the next day.

Here's the first takeaway this morning:

(SLIDE 4)

Significant spiritual conversations usually occur when you least feel like having them.

Maybe you can relate to Doug at this point in the story. You've just sat down to watch your favourite show and the phone rings. (Apologies if I've done that to anyone here!) Or you've just got home from a hard tiring day at work and school and someone comes knocking on your door for help. Or you're out somewhere in town, you're going to be late for your next appointment and someone sees you and they want to 'talk' to you.

Or you're like a fish out of water in a bar in a Midwestern town in the United States.

Let's pause the story there.

I'm going to try something today, whether it will work or not you be the judge. I want to try and talk about three things at the same time. Multi-tasking for pastors if you like. And you can ask Roxy, I'm not the greatest at multi-tasking, but let's give it a go. I

think this whole thing about Godspace is putting ourselves out of our comfort zone so to speak, so I'm going to try it.

The three things I want to talk about at the same time are firstly, Doug's story and his encounter with the bar clientele which we've started with and will expand as we go along; secondly, Jesus' story about his encounter with a Samaritan woman; and thirdly, your story, my story, this church's story with the not-yet Christians in our family, friends, workplaces, schools, community.

So let's go back to our friend Doug.

Picture Doug and his two companions at the Stepping Out bar. The music is pumping, the drinks are flowing for the patrons, there's loud talk, colourful language, people playing pool.

What do you do? You order some soft drinks and you sit at the bar. So they do. Not too much time passes before they are approached by a couple of pool players who ask if they want to play. Doug and Anthony are from an organisation called 'Athletes in Action' and playing pool is right up their alley, so they jump in and they manage to quickly earn some credibility on the pool table with a few wins.

Notice what Doug and his crew do and do not do. They do not start talking about God straight away. They do not start with a talk on how to be saved. But they **do** keep their eyes open for opportunities to engage with people. They do engage with people on their level.

Let's leave Doug for a bit and jump to Jesus' story now. To set the scene it's the middle of the day, the heat is soaring, and Jesus is on his way back to his home town of Galilee. He's tired, hungry, and thirsty. He could easily save time and bypass a place called Samaria but the Bible says "He **needed** to go through Samaria."

Samaria was not a place where good Jewish boys like Jesus were meant to go through. The Jewish people despised the Samaritan people. And it was mutual.

The resentment between the Jews and Samaritans were time-honoured and historic; they couldn't stand each other.

So, the fact that Jesus 'needed' to go through Samaria indicates that we should pay close attention to why, as he was not only crossing political, religious and geographical boundaries; he was risking his life and position in the community too.

(SLIDE 5)

Let's carry on the story in John 4, verse 5:

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus could likely have got his own drink or kept walking until he found another place to get a drink. But this was exactly where he was meant to be. God placed this Samaritan woman in his life at that precise moment.

Pause. Has God placed anyone in your life at this precise moment? Is there someone there who needs your listening ear? Not necessarily to convert them to Christianity, not to tell them right from wrong, not to win them over, but simply to be there? To be present. To be available and to have no agenda.

Are their people in our immediate community waiting for us to engage with them at their level, to listen to where they are at,

to find out their struggles, fears and the things that keep them awake at night?

God, give us eyes to see and ears to hear them ...

Back to Doug and his crew, they're carving it up at the pool table and the other players are starting to get interested in their story. "We've never seen you guys before. Are you from around here?"

Doug tells them this is their first time in town. They ask him what they are doing there. Doug laughs and tells them, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Intrigued, they tell him to give it a shot. So he tells them that one of the bigger churches downtown invited him to speak the next day. Then Doug asks them, Can you help me out?

Remember Jesus' question to the Samaritan woman, "Will you give me a drink?"

(SLIDE 6)

Takeaway number 2: *Good questions create great opportunities for listening.*

I'm sure there are times in your life you remember when someone took a genuine interest in you and asked you some great questions. Maybe that helped bring you to God, or to your

spouse! When we're dating we often have these deep and meaningful conversations about life, love and everything in between.

If you're not already, become someone who asks great questions and show people you care and want to listen to what they have to say.

(SLIDE 7)

Jesus was showing by his questions and listening that he cared about the Samaritan woman and he wanted to listen to what she had to say. Let's pick up the story, verse 10:

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

One thing to note here is that no-one would give this Samaritan woman the time of day. Literally. She was out in the heat of the day doing hard back-breaking work. Woman usually came out to gather water at the start or end of day when it was cooler and they would do this in groups. The Samaritan woman was alone, it was stinking hot, and here's this man taking an interest in her.

Again, Jesus literally 'wets' her appetite for this water – eternal life. He gets her interest. He realises that she is out by herself at the heat of the day and things have not gone well in her life up until this point. We will see why soon.

Back to Doug and his story. Several others in the 'Stepping Out' bar overhear their conversation and they start gathering around. Doug mentions that sometimes churches are not very clued in to how they are coming across in a community because they talk more than they listen. "Hey, you could help me – and them – by telling us about your experiences with the church in general."

What an invitation ... he's not asking them what can or has the church done for you, he's asking them what do you think of the church? What's your experience been like?

Doug didn't know where the conversation was going, so he asked them for directions.

Doug was putting the ball in their corner so to speak and seeking to listen and understand them, rather than seeking to speak and be understood.

(SLIDE 8)

Takeaway number three: *Listen, to understand. Rather than speak, to be understood.*

If you're an introvert like me, you might find it a little easier to listen than to do most of the speaking. Or if you're an extrovert, this might be way out of your zone and even when someone's talking to you, you're thinking of what you can say next, what does this person need to hear.

(Introverts and extroverts – ask who's who)

Either way, it's a challenge for us all. Listen, to understand. Get their insights, opinions, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs. Don't try lead with yours.

Back to Jesus, the Samaritan woman has just asked him to give her this water so that she doesn't have to keep coming back to the well to fill her water jar.

(SLIDE 9)

¹⁶ *Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."*

¹⁷ *"I have no husband," she replied.*

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband.¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

Jesus is not judging here, he's stating facts, and giving the woman an opportunity to bring her current man into this conversation. Furthermore, Jesus is showing her that he understands her and knows what her life has been like.

Jesus is engaging with her on a deeper level now.

Coming back to Doug, the bartender gets wind of the conversation, turns the music down and pretty soon all the people have pulled up a chair around the pool table and begin to share stories about how they had been wounded by the church in one way or another.

The bartender says she stopped going to church after she was told that her miscarriage was a result of the sin in her life. Another person says he used to teach Sunday school, but stopped because the church was always asking for more money.

This went on for around thirty minutes, as people who were strangers before, share their true hearts at a deeper level.

The youngest person in the bar saves the best for last. She tells them that her dad, the owner of the bar, used to be a pastor. He left the ministry when the church he was pastoring split. No-one at the bar was aware that their drinking buddy, the bar owner, used to pastor a church.

Then it was the young woman's time to ask a question. She looked at the three 'Churchies' and asks them, "You know, I've asked a lot of people this question, but no one has been able to answer it. Could you guys tell me if it's possible to know for sure that if you died, you would go to heaven?"

(SLIDE 10)

Take away number four: When Godspace is created, be prepared for people to share their deepest hearts...

Maybe you've had that question asked to you before, or maybe you've asked it yourself to someone. I've had people ask me it before and it's a great question to explore the answer together and share why you believe what you believe.

And if you think about it, it's the same question that the Samaritan woman asked Jesus. Sir, can you give me this water please? Can you give me eternal life?

This Samaritan woman was on the outer. She was a not-yet Christian if you like. Jesus took a genuine interest in her. Listened to her story. Her questions. Her longing.

Who are the outers, the not-yet's in our world that desperately need someone to listen to them?

Consider the following: A group of teenage prostitutes from San Francisco were interviewed and one question asked was: "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" Their response, always preceded by sadness and tears was unanimous: "What I needed most was someone to listen to me. Someone who cared enough to listen to me."

See, I believe that good listening is essential to all of our relationships. It has consequences – good or bad. Listening is something that God uses to bring people closer to Him and to each other. God's desire is for us to listen to him first and foremost, and then to listen to each other, especially at the heart level.

Doug and Anthony ended up having what they call a 'divine dialogue' with the young woman and others at the bar. They walked into that bar as strangers, but left feeling like fellow travellers on the journey of life. They had noticed Godspace

around them and listened their way into a spiritual conversation.

And what's more, they were invited to come back the next night for Karaoke!!! (you know you've made it when you're asked back for Karaoke!) That's the end of Doug's story, but one can't help wonder what happened as a result for the young woman and others in the bar.

When we think of the Samaritan woman, we know what happened to her. The Bible says that Jesus reveals Himself as the Messiah to her and she leaves to go back to her city and tell everyone about her God encounter.

(SLIDE 11)

Verse 39 says:

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did."

Jesus noticed the woman, took an interest in her journey, listened to where she was at, and amazing things happened as a result.

So, who are we called to listen to in our lives ... who do we notice around us ... where is the Godspace in which God wants us to engage with not-yet Christians??

This week, take some time to listen to the other, the outer, the not-yet, and listen to understand.

Let me finish with a story.

Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.'"

"I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'"

That's a challenge for us in our fast-paced culture: Listen slowly.

So, as I invite the music team to come up and lead us in another

time of worship, here are the takeaways for us this morning:

(SLIDE 12)

Significant spiritual conversations usually occur when you least feel like having them.

Good questions create great opportunities for listening.

Listen, to understand. Rather than speak, to be understood.

When Godspace is created, be prepared for people to share their deepest hearts...

May we notice the Godspace within us and around us this coming week; and may we take the time to really listen to God and others.

Amen.