

A Sermon Preached by  
Fr. Edwin Smith for Proper 17, The Season After Pentecost, Year B  
August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin

In our Epistle lesson this morning from James, the author says, “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce god’s righteousness.”

Now, most of us can readily agree with the last part of that passage. It certainly is important for a Christian not to jump to anger, because it does not reflect the righteousness of god. I dare say most of you restrain your anger for that very reason.

That part of the passage that causes problems for us is the first part: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak.” Listening is difficult. Most of us are already beginning to think of what we will say when the other person has only begun to speak. I know this has been a work in progress for me.

How many of us are ready to share our own difficulties (or successes) when we hear someone else’s? (I won’t ask for a show of hands). It is almost as if we stuff ear plugs in our ears the moment the other person begins to talk. But, I’m not sure this message from James is about having proper manners, although that is certainly important. I think it has more to do with listening in order to be able to say the appropriate thing in response.

That is the secret of good communication: careful listening, not only to what is said and how it is said, but also to what is **not** said.

It is especially important for the Christian to know what is being said. One preacher suggested it is like being a salesperson. Not even the best salesperson can know what to offer a customer until they have heard the customer express their need.

Likewise, Christians can not share the gospel with any success until they have heard the needs of the person with whom they are speaking. We need to know what is being said.

The same is true of the culture in which we find ourselves. We need to listen to the culture in order to know what to say. Rick brand, suggests the world, the culture in which we live, is saying that “The Christian community in going to be the only one responsible for telling the Christian story.” He goes on to suggest that this is a dramatic change. Society no longer shares our story. One has only to read the popular press or listen to television or radio to know that the message of Christianity is no longer heard from those sources. It was not so long ago, but it is no longer.

Children are raised without ever having heard the wonderful stories from scripture, let alone attending Sunday School. They may be well fed, healthy, and smarter than ever. But absent for many, if not the majority of children, is exposure to the basic messages of Christianity.

This is why it is so important that we at Saint Thomas offer programs like Awana and youth group and d-groups to those who are not affiliated in any way with Saint Thomas. This is why it is so important that we support those programs, volunteer to assist them, and welcome those children and young people into our midst.

Too many parents have the notion that they want their children to decide for themselves if they want to hear those messages when they grow up. That my friends, is too late. It is like giving the car keys to a teenager and telling them to drive without any preparation or instruction.

All this begs a question, however. “How will we tell the story of Jesus, the story of Christianity, if we do not know it ourselves, and know it well? Well enough to share it with another generation. Or to those of our own generation who have not heard it.

For years, some churches have prepared young people and adults for confirmation as if that was the end of it. Some churches have confirmed children at a ridiculously young age, never to see them again once confirmation was over. We have done the same with adults, too.

The Christian life requires serious study for the rest of your life. Simply going to church and depending solely upon sermons for continuing Christian education is not acceptable. Involvement in some serious study is essential, whether alone or in a group.

We are soon to begin another season of Sunday School, Awana, youth group and adult classes. Why not offer to bring an unchurched neighbor's child to St. Thomas? Why not bring an unchurched friend to share in what we have to offer?

When I was a youngster, my family did not go to church. I went with a friend. When the friend moved away, I found a church closer to home, and went alone. That habit continued throughout high school.

It was not that I came from a family of non-believers, but I did not hear the story of Christianity -- the story of salvation in Jesus -- at home. I most certainly heard it at Sunday School, vacation bible school, and youth group.

My children had no choice. They went to church and Sunday school. I never heard a complaint from any of them. They participated in youth activities and summer camp. It was the least I could do for them, and it is the least we can do for those who have no one else to bring them -- to encourage them.

This fall, let's commit ourselves to listening --. To be quick to listen and slow to speak. I suggest that we will hear the voices of many who need to hear the message of Christianity. And we can be the way they hear it. Let's throw the ear plugs away.