

2025

# YEAR OF LISTENING

MONTHLY  
DEVOTIONS



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



Dear Friends in Christ,

Welcome to **2025: The Year of Listening**. Our focus in 2025 is to learn the sacred art of listening. Listening to God. Listening to Ourselves. Listening to Others. And Listening to the Community.

In Isaiah 55, the prophet invites God's people to listen: **"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live..."** (Isaiah 55:3a). Isaiah extends this invitation to a people who are living in Exile. This is a people living without hope. But even to those suffering in far-away land, Isaiah offers the promise of hope and restoration. God invites the exiles to **"Come to the waters... Come to the banquet... Come to me... and listen, so that you may live..."**

God's invitation to listen is a gift that permeates the Scriptures. From the Shema, **"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"** (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). To the Psalms, **"Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer"** (Psalm 61:1). To the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, **"Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock"** (Matthew 7:24). To the words the Exalted Jesus repeats to the seven churches in Revelation, **"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches"** (Revelation 2-3). God longs for us to hear, so God invites us to listen.

What follows is a 12 session collection of Monthly Devotions written by leaders from all across Northwestern Ohio and the world. These 15-20 minute devotions are ideal for Church Council, Committee Meetings, and Staff Meetings. Each monthly devotion follows a simple rhythm: An Opening Activity, Scripture, Reflection, Discussion Questions, and a Closing Prayer. These devotions will help you and your community grow in the sacred art of listening to God, Listening to Ourselves, Listening to Others, and Listening to the Community.

**"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live..."** (Isaiah 54:3a).

Blessings,

Bishop Daniel G. Beaudoin  
Season of Advent 2024

Listening to God

# JANUARY

*Prepared By*

**STEVE ACKERMAN**

*St. John, Cardington*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Read: **Isaiah 55:3a** aloud. After reading, invite the group into a period of silent prayer and listening. During this time, encourage each person to: quiet their hearts and minds, be open to whatever God may want to communicate, not rush or feel pressured to hear something specific—just be still and attentive. This is not a time for talking or sharing, but purely listening for God's voice. Encourage participants to remain in a posture of openness. After a few minutes invite the group to write down a few notes or share their experience.

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Devotional Reflection

2025 is the Year of Listening in the Northwest Ohio Synod. The theme verse is Isaiah 55:3a which reads "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." As I read this verse I am drawn to the word "incline".

The use of this word suggests more than mere auditory perception, it suggests an attitude. To incline one's ear to God hints at a purposeful effort to direct our attention towards Him and comprehend His message. It implies a humble and receptive stance, demonstrating our eagerness to receive divine guidance and wisdom. By inclining our ear, we exhibit a willingness to be instructed and led by God.

When we incline our ear, we draw closer to God, fostering a deeper relationship with Him. This connection brings spiritual nourishment and fulfillment. Our hearts and minds are transformed, leading to personal growth and a more meaningful life.

Moreover, the word "incline" can also be used as a noun, illustrating the benefits of inclining our ear. An incline consists of two planes - a horizontal plane and a vertical plane. Through these planes, an incline enables us to move simultaneously forward and upward. Inclining our ear toward God moves us forward with the knowledge and insights we have already gained, while also propelling us upward to discover new revelations that He has in store for us.

As we embark on the Year of Listening, let us resolve to incline our ears towards God. May we seek His presence, actively listen to His voice, and respond with obedience and faith. In doing so, we will experience the transformative power of spiritual listening, leading to a more meaningful and fulfilling life in Him.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Reflecting on this, how can you cultivate a deeper sense of spiritual listening in your daily life?
2. What distractions might you need to set aside to truly hear and respond to God's voice?

### **Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, thank You for inviting us to come to You and listen. Help us to quiet our hearts and minds so that we can hear Your voice clearly. Teach us to seek You earnestly and to prioritize our relationship with You above all else. May Your words bring life and direction to our paths. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*

Listening to God

# FEBRUARY

*Prepared By*

**DEACON JEAN WISE**

*St. Peter, Edon*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Identify together areas in your life where people gather to listen to each other. For example, the breakfast diner, the coffee shop, the kitchen or dinner table, etc. Where do you spend time in deep listening to others? Next, as a council, talk about what listening spaces exist in your life together in community. How might you listen more deeply in those moments? Are there other listening spaces you might adopt?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”*

## Scripture Verse

**James 1:19** *“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”*

## Reflection

I remember when my youngest child began to learn to drive. The state law had changed and as it is now, teens had to clock in 50 hours of driving with the parent. 50 hours? I panicked. I remember thinking, “what a burden this would be. I would never have time for all this. I was working full time; how would I ever get this done?”

Those 50 hours of being in the car with Brian turned out to be wonderful moments of sharing. They were unexpected gifts of time of listening and enjoying each other. He learned to drive; I learned to listen. We shared as we never had before. The time together created opportunities to pay attention and to hear one another. Amazing holy ground even inside of an automobile.

Learning to listen is priceless and worth the time and effort. Slowing down and being attentive to God opens our hearts gradually, nourishing us deeply and connecting us to God in new ways.

This one on one with another helps us hear God in deep and rich ways. As the Native Americans wisely said, “Speak only half as much as you listen.”

## Discussion Questions

1. How will you slow down, spend time, and pay attention to God this week?
2. What helps you hear God in deeper ways?

## Prayer

*Slow us down, Lord. When we rush through life, we fail to hear you. We don't stop to notice you. We pay more attention to our doings than being with you. Help us to listen more deeply to you. Amen*

Listening to God

# MARCH

*Prepared By*

**PASTOR MELODI HAGEN**

*Trinity, Moulton*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



### Opening Activity

Set a timer for 5 minutes and enjoy the gift of silence. Invite the council members to choose a way they enjoy being silence for example; go for a walk; light a candle; look out your window at God's created moment for you.

### Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

### Scripture Verse

**Isaiah 45:7** *"I form light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the Lord do all things."*

### Devotional Reflection

If I had to pick a single spiritual practice that has transformed my life and helped me to be a better listener, it would be the gift of silence.

Growing up as an only child I hated silence. I came home after school to an empty house and quickly turned on the T.V., got a snack, started my chores, and my homework all at the same time. This was before the internet was created. Now my children come home and do all these things while chatting with their friends online and watching 1 min. short videos as their commercial breaks. For generations we have prided ourselves that multi-tasking and filling time and space with our thoughts, posts, and to do lists was good for us and others. But, where is there space for noticing God's work? Where is the space for the other voice?

In Isaiah 45 we hear our strength is not in our ability to manage a bunch of projects, text messages, and good mental space on our own. Isaiah says our strength is when we are present to God in every space we enter. A God who is in light and darkness. A God who is continually speaking to us when we see progress and when we experience disaster.

I didn't know how much I would need the practice of silence until I became a new pastor and a new mother all at the same time. I couldn't multitask fast enough and my head, body, and spirit were running low. Thankfully, God sent a mentor to practice with me the gift of silence. He taught me it was okay to have good thoughts and dark thoughts. It was okay to feel gratitude and to feel vulnerable because God was speaking in it all. The gift of silence has made me a more gracious listener. Instead of judging or being afraid of how I should respond, I welcome the space and silence as God's gracious gift to be present in the moment to others.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Where does silence naturally happen in your life? In the car? When you're cooking or doing the dishes? How might you use that space, to be present to God?
2. The gift of silence is to be practiced in community. During worship, a bible study, or special meeting, how might you practice the gift of silence together?

### **Prayer**

*Gracious God, Thank you for the gift of silence. Thank you for making us aware of your presence in light and in darkness. Help us to use your gift of silence to quiet our judgements and agendas and to listen deeply with others who long to be heard and to encounter your presence. Amen*

Listening to Self

APRIL

*Prepared By*

**PASTOR DREW TUCKER**

*HopeWood Outdoors*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

### Opening Activity

Take in a slow breath and hold it briefly before slowly breathing out. Now, do this three more times. With each inhale, internally speak "I am." On the exhale, internally say, "a child of God."

### Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

### Scripture

**Psalms 139:7** *"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"*

### Devotional Reflection

Where do you find God's wisdom? God's will? God's presence?

Often, we look to things outside ourselves, and with good reason! The Bible is God's Written Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Of course we'd seek God's wisdom there. The church is the Body of Christ, a community called together by God. Of course we'd seek God's will within.

Too often, we act as though God can't speak through us. We have something of a species-wide imposter syndrome. We forget that God's first reaction to human beings was to say, "very good!" We forget that it was love for us, not pity, that led God to become human in Jesus.

When we seek God's wisdom, God's will, and God's presence, we certainly should look to the Bible. We certainly should engage the church. But we shouldn't forget to look within those creatures that God so fearfully and wonderfully made: us. The Psalmist reminds us that God is present everywhere, from the most obvious to the most hidden places. Do not let your inner self remain hidden when seeking connection with God. When you listen for God, remember to listen to your body, your mind, and your spirit, for you are God's image bearer.

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you have trouble listening for God's voice within yourself? Why do you think that is?
2. What tools do you find helpful to differentiate between your selfish ambitions and God's leadership?

**Prayer**

*Creative God, thank you for speaking in myriad ways. Help us to find your wisdom amidst scripture's pages, your will amongst communal discernment, and your presence within our very selves. As we listen within, call us out into your ministry, for your will, for the good of all your creation. Amen.*

# Listening to Self

# MAY

*Prepared By*

**PASTOR BETH GILLER**

*St. Mark, East Toledo*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

We often talk about "hearing" God's voice. Share together how you have experienced the nudging of the Holy Spirit? Is it in contemplative practices like prayer and meditation? Is it the feeling you get in your chest or gut as situations unfold? Is it an attention to patterns or unique happenings? How can knowing this about each other strengthen us to listen better as a community?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Scripture

**Psalm 46:10** *God says, "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."*

## Reflection

We hear dozens (perhaps hundreds!) of voices every day. Amid all that clamor, it can be difficult to discern which voices are directing us toward God's will, and which are leading us away. I've had some experience of attempting to figure that out, and some wise teachers along the way.

Sister Marianne Longo, RSM, was my spiritual director for about twenty years, and in almost every session she would challenge me to "come home to Beth." She recognized that I did not often listen to myself, and I would regularly discount the guidance and information that the Holy Spirit was offering to me because I was distracted by other voices.

Over the years, I have grown in my trust of that "still, small voice" which sits somewhere in my gut. Some people might call it a conscience or intuition. When I can ignore the other voices and be aware of the work of that *holy intuition*, God has guided me through many personal and ministry decisions.

Back in 1986, I was finishing my last year of seminary, and that holy intuition was screaming at me to listen. Since high school, I had struggled with an addiction to alcohol and had reached the point where I was drinking alone every day. I KNEW I was an alcoholic. Through a series of God-engineered coincidences, I was given a work-study job at a local detox center and I attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with the residents on my first night of work. Also, a friend had disclosed that one of our classmates was in recovery, and the next day I went to him and tearfully asked for help. He introduced me to a 12-step recovery program and I began a long journey to sobriety which still continues today. That journey began with a tremendous holy discomfort which propelled me to act, and to trust the solutions that God presented.

There have been many times when I “came home to Beth” and listened to my gut, trusting the presence of the Spirit for help and guidance. There have been times when I didn’t listen because I was distracted, anxious or skeptical. I soon discovered that God’s voice is faithful and will lead me when I listen.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How do you experience holy intuition? Is it a thought, a feeling, a set of circumstances, a dream, a verse?
2. The result of trusting God’s voice as God speaks to you is peace. Have you been peaceful in a difficult situation even though the circumstances were hard?

### **Prayer**

*God of the universe, we thank you that you love us so much that you speak to us through our own impressions and conscience. Teach us to be aware of how you reach us, increase our trust and help us set aside the voices which are not of you. In Jesus' name. AMEN.*



## Listening to Self

# JUNE

*Prepared By*

**TONYA WAGNER**

*Soaring Arts Studio*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

(Scan QR Code. If the image doesn't appear here, I will also attach it separately, see second page.) Listen to this message. Reflect.



Scan the QR code and listen to the story.

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Scripture

**Ephesians 2:10** *"For we are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

**Zephaniah 3:17** *"He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you with His love. He will exalt over you with singing."*

## Reflection

When thinking about "listening to self," the first thing that I think of is a question. "What voices do I hear in my head regarding myself?" "How do I see myself?"

A lot of times, we listen to the world's standards of who we should be, and yet we aren't of the world. We aren't supposed to fit in those boxes. So, oftentimes "listening" requires building on the theme of rest that we focused on in 2024. It requires pausing, stilling our souls, and putting on those noise-cancelling headphones that help us to drown out all the other voices. It's in that space that we begin to tune our ears to hear what is true. It's there that we can start to heal and listen as God continually speaks His love and adoration over us.

## Discussion Questions

1. What did you personally need to hear?
2. What truths did God speak over you today?

## Prayer

*Father God, thank you for your intentionality in creating us. Thank you for speaking your love over us, day in and day out. Help us to silence the other voices that aren't life-giving, so that we can hear You clearly. Help us to listen as you speak of who we are to You. Then, may we have the God-fidence to be who You created us to be and live Your love into the world! It's in Your amazing name we pray. Amen.*



Listening to Each Other

**JULY**

*Prepared By*

**PASTOR ROBIN SMALL**

*St. Mark's, Bowling Green*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Divide group members into pairs. One person speaks about a topic (e.g., a challenge they're facing in ministry, a vision for the church) for 2-3 minutes. The listener must actively listen without interrupting, focusing on both verbal and non-verbal cues. Afterward, the listener reflects back what they heard by summarizing and asking if they understood correctly. Switch roles and repeat.

Debrief: After the exercise, discuss the experience. What did it feel like to be listened to? What did they notice about the listening process?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Scripture

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*  
Romans 12:1 (NIV)

## Reflection

The carpet was frayed on the edges, the pew cushions were stained and dotted with holes covered with duct tape - all signs of a worship space that was much used and well-loved. Some repairs and renovations were needed. Two families, looking for ways to give to the church in memory of their loved ones, felt called to this project. And so, while the work was done, we worshiped in another space.

Finally, after two months, it was time to return to worship in the sanctuary. The altar was rolled back in and the organ was liberated from its plastic wrap. The newly redecorated sanctuary had become a peaceful place to offer ourselves as living sacrifices and be made holy and pleasing in God's mercy.

The American and Christian flags did not come back into the worship space. Did anyone notice? You bet! "Where's the American flag?" they asked. This question opened the door for a conversation about proper worship. I invited those who had questions to come and listen with open hearts and minds. About fifteen men, mostly veterans, came on a sunny Thursday afternoon as we met over coffee and apple pie.

We started by listening to God's word, including passages from the Psalms about worship. We explored God's first command to have no other gods. (Exodus 20:2-3). We reviewed the commentary of Martin Luther on the first commandment found in the Large Catechism explaining that we are to come into worship, offering our whole hearts and complete trust in the one God who, through Jesus Christ unites us.

In the fourth commandment, "Honor your Father and Mother." (Exodus 20:12) Luther expands the command by explaining that we are to be active citizens and that "God would also richly bless us and give us grace to train men by whom land and people might be improved." Finally, we explored proper U.S. flag etiquette and worship practices of other mainline Christian churches.

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit opened our eyes to understand the importance of completely focusing on the cross - the symbol of God's grace and mercy. In this revelation, the group decided that the better place for the flag is at each door to the worship space as a reminder that as we pass by the flag and enter worship, we leave behind all worldly identities and offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God. Then, after hearing, "Go in peace. Serve the Lord!" we exit the sanctuary, pass by the flag, and remember that we are called to carry the light of Christ out into the world in our vocations and citizenship. I give thanks to God for the bravery of those who gathered to listen and better understand God's will for true and proper worship.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What "gods" keep us from offering our whole selves to God in true and proper worship?
2. Share about a time when you truly listened to understand another point of view. Think about a time when the Holy Spirit helped you speak so that others came to understand.

### **Prayer**

*O God, "I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory" (Psalm 63:2). Help us, your beloved children, to offer ourselves to you as living sacrifices and be made holy and pleasing. Fill us with understanding and wisdom so that we may "strive for justice and peace in all the earth" (baptismal promise) in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen*

Listening to Each Other

# AUGUST

*Prepared By*

**JEAN COHRS**

*Filling Homes*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Either as a group, in pairs, or in triads, pick an object to talk about (it can be anything, a pen, a ball, etc.). The person holding the object talks about what they feel or are thinking about the object in 30 seconds. The other participants cannot speak but must look the person talking directly in the eyes without interrupting. After the speaker is finished, ask the listeners what they heard. Continue passing the object. After everyone has had a turn, discuss some questions (below).

## Discussion Questions

1. How did it feel to be listened to?
2. How did it feel to actively listen to someone without interrupting?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”*

## Scripture

**James 1:19** *“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.”*

## Reflection

In our fast-paced world, listening can often feel like a lost art. We are more prone to speak or respond quickly, or even interrupt, rather than taking the time to listen deeply to others. Yet, in the Bible, we are repeatedly encouraged to listen—both to God and to one another. James 1:19 reminds us that we should be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” This simple instruction speaks to the heart of how we should engage in our relationships, especially when we are trying to build community and love one another as Christ loves us. In a world that often prioritizes talking over listening, we are called to be different. Listening is more than just hearing words - it is about giving someone the dignity of being **truly heard**. To listen in the biblical sense is to understand the heart behind the words, to value the other person’s thoughts and perspective, and to respond with empathy and Christian kindness.

## Prayer

*Heavenly Gracious God, we come before You with open hearts and minds, seeking Your presence in the quiet moments and the busy ones. Help us to be still enough to hear Your voice, even in the midst of the noise that surrounds us. Grant us the patience to listen to those we encounter, recognizing that every person has something valuable to share. Thank You, God, for the gift of hearing, for the opportunity to connect with others, and for the grace to listen. May we be your instrument of peace and understanding in all our conversations, reflecting Your love in every word. In your holy and precious name we pray. Amen.*



Listening to Each Other

# SEPTEMBER

*Prepared By*

**EMILY HEMMINGER**

*St. Mark, East Toledo*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

During tonight's meeting, consider out loud how every decision may impact your neighbor. What about folks in your congregation? What about the community surrounding your church? If you struggle to answer these questions, what more might you need to know about your neighbor? How could you learn more?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Scripture Verse

**Philippians 2:1-4** *"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."*

## Reflection

Last year, our church was approached with an enticing offer: build a cell tower in our extra parking lot, and receive a nice big "rent" check each month from the cellular company for our trouble. The tower would be very tall - one of those "made to look like a tree" types - and would be set right in the middle of our neighborhood. From our perspective as church leadership, it seemed like an easy yes. What a blessing from God! We talked about it as a church council and decided to connect with the company to get more information.

Around this same time, God was stirring lots of growth in our Neighborhood Ministries. Not only was our monthly dinner serving a record number of households, but a new after school kids ministry had been started to connect with and serve the children in our church's urban neighborhood. Church members were given opportunities to listen to the stories of our neighbors, and they began building close bonds with the people who lived nearby the church. Now, the houses members passed in the neighborhood weren't just buildings - they were the homes of people known and cared about.

At the next month's council meeting, the cell tower in the extra parking lot was on the agenda - but this time, there was a new discussion:

"I think that's Jenny's home right next door to the parking lot. She lives there with her three elementary-aged kids. Have we asked her about the cell tower?"

"And don't forget Amanda and her family live next to them."

“What about the families that come to play at the playground across the street? How would they feel about the tower?”

After a bit of back and forth, it was decided that there was only one option: we needed to listen to our neighbors before we moved ahead with the cellular company. Together, we drafted an “invitation to conversation” letter and hand-delivered it to the people living in our church’s neighborhood. On the night of the meeting, 15 of our neighbors showed up to express their concerns about the tower being built. After listening closely to our neighbors and praying together as a community, our church council decided definitively to cancel any plans for the cell tower.

Each month, when we see familiar faces enter into the doors of our church building for Neighborhood Ministry events, we are reminded of the blessing it was to listen to each other and to our community. We are bonded together in a new and holy way, with greater trust and mutual understanding. Our church members listened to our church neighbors, and our church council listened to and honored the concerns of one another. Philippians 2 encourages us to have “the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind”. While that may not always happen naturally or easily, this passage gives us a sure-fire way to work towards that unity: “Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” How can we know the interests of others? By listening intentionally. When given the option to serve ourselves or listen to our neighbor, I pray that we choose our neighbor - every time.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In what ways did intentional listening positively impact the church community in this story?
2. How has your church intentionally listened to the community inside and outside of your walls? In what ways could God be calling you to action through what you hear?

### **Prayer**

*Dear God,*

*Thank you for intentionally listening to our every joy, care, and concern. Teach us how to love others and listen to others just as you do. Lead us to humility and unity as a body of believers, that we may bring glory to you by how we serve those around us. In your holy name we pray, Amen.*

Listening to Community

# OCTOBER

*Prepared By*

**PASTOR MIKE HANCK**

*Salem, Toledo*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Think of a time when you were in a public place. What was the noise like? Was it joyful or dreadful? How did you know? What did you focus in on? What caused your attention to shift?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Reflection

Most people believe themselves to be good listeners. Surprisingly, I disagree. At night, when it's quiet and my neighbor isn't screaming and cussing at her children, I will sit on my back porch and review the past. Depending on the night, I can wander back ten years ago or a mere ten days. Plenty of times, I realize something new about that person or moment, though I've rehashed it several times already. "Oh. They just wanted to know what it was like to have a father-figure." "She just needed to feel safer." Aside from anything that someone out-and-out tells us, there is so much that we don't know about or hear in people. Even the most astute among us misses so much information about other human beings on a daily basis. I'm not even sure how one could begin to quantify what we do not hear. How much more complex is it, then, when we try to listen to a large group of people, known as a community? It is here that pastors and mayors and presidents and coaches run aground so often. How do we listen to a community? How can we possibly succeed in this?

Nobody ever asks about this, so they never hear about it, but I spent a year in a group home for adults with developmental disabilities. That's where I met Jeffrey and Viva and Joy and Katrina. There were others, but these four people would fall under my care, which is much like a rock falling on one's head. I was not gifted as a group home assistant. To make matters worse, how do you know what someone with Down's Syndrome wants when they are not speaking the words? I've never been blind before, so how can I anticipate what works for a person who is? We ask questions; we observe; humbly, we find ourselves on an inclined ramp of learning with no end. We begin to notice all of the uneven cracks in the sidewalk, and we call them out before encountering them; we see a person with a dog approaching, and guide your person away from the animal's path; we see that it is about to rain, we take proactive measures so that your person is not caught unaware and flustered; we discourage people from touching that person before announcing themselves and asking permission, whether a hand or a shoulder. Slowly, we discover that you've begun to listen. It's because we finally started to give a [dang], and that's what it means to listen to a community: to begin to care.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why are listening and caring so closely correlated and related?
2. Which communities or congregations do you refuse to listen to?

### **Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, we all struggle with listening to other people. You assure us that this doesn't mean we are irredeemable or "bad" at our core, and you promise to help us, always, when we need it. (And when do we not need it?) Please Lord, help us to hear people. Help us to understand them better. Guide us in how to respect them. Help us to avoid the pitfalls of self, and allow us to take some delight in these, all of the communities you have made, for what is not truly yours? Amen.*

Listening to Community

# NOVEMBER

*Prepared By*

**PASTOR EDDA SWILLA MBWAMBO**

*Dodoma, Tanzania*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Discuss together, the following questions; where do you see unity in the church? Where do you see the unity in your family? How is unity on display within groups in the church? Youth programs? The Women's ministry?

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Scripture

John 17:20-23 - "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

## Reflection

Praise the Lord God and Jesus the man of God. Greetings to you from the church leaders of the Dodoma Diocese and from my family too. May our Lord God bless you all.

One of the foundations of the church is for God's people to be together in unity. True unity is more than just being together. It is possible to be together physically but lack unity. It is possible to gather as a group but still lack unity.

Beloved friends, unity is a precious thing in life because as the Swahili proverb says, "umoja ni nguvu" *unity is strength, division is weakness*. That is why Psalm 133:1 says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." So, it is clear that it is possible to dwell together without being united, and you can share things without being united.

In the Gospel of John we read a prayer that the Lord Jesus is praying for His disciples. He says, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me...I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one...I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity."

Beloved, the issue of unity is important for everyone, especially as we talk about unity in the family, unity in the church, unity among church leaders, and unity in the nation.



Now I want to speak about unity in the church. For the church to move forward, unity is important. But what do we mean when we talk about unity? Unity may look like having one united purpose within the church so that whatever is agreed upon is done for the glory of God. As a group of Christians, unity may look like having one perspective to live by or being united in bringing people to Jesus.

As people in relationship together through the church, this passage teaches us a few things about what life together in unity looks like:

1. Unity reflects God's nature: When we are united, we live according to God's character. Jesus prayed, "protect them so that they may be one." Unity brings God's protection upon us.
2. Unity draws God's presence: Unity is a gift of togetherness. When you agree in unity, there is nothing you cannot achieve. When the church is united, God is in your midst, and His power descends and works among you. Whether it's healing, provision for the needy, or overcoming challenges, God works through your unity. Beloved, unity is a source of blessing in the lives of church members, the community, and the entire nation.
3. Unity hinders the enemy's schemes: There is a saying: "One finger cannot crush a louse," or "Unity is strength, division is weakness." A single stick can be easily broken, but it's not easy to break fifteen sticks bound together.

There is power of unity in homes, in churches, and among church leaders. The power of unity is essential because it allows God's work to progress, the church to grow, young people to know God, and the Good News to spread throughout the world.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How does listening play a role in fostering unity within a community?
2. What is one way you as a council might listen in new ways? How might you strive for unity?

### **Prayer**

*Dear God, You have taught us that in true unity we can share your word of love. Help us to listen in a way that brings unity in our community, Guide us as we pray together, share different ideas and show the love of God. Come among us as we grow in unity and remind us always that in unity is our power. AMEN.*

*My friends I wish you all the best, and unity in everything, May our Lord be with you.*

Listening to Community

# DECEMBER

*Prepared By*

**KATHY BARBEE**

*Christy's Corner Cafe*



Northwestern Ohio Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## Opening Activity

Read: **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 aloud.** After reading, invite the group into a period of silent prayer and listening. During this time, encourage each person to: quiet their hearts and minds, be open to whatever God may want to communicate, not rush or feel pressured to hear something specific—just be still and attentive. This is not a time for talking or sharing, but purely listening for God's voice. Encourage participants to remain in a posture of openness. After a few minutes invite the group to write down a few notes or share their experience.

## Memory Verse

**Isaiah 55:3a** *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

## Scripture Verse

**Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** *"Two people are better than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help."*

## Reflection

A community is a group of people who share common values, interests, or goals. It is about connections, relationships, a sense of trust and belonging. Communities help us to be seen, heard, and valued. They can be a powerful force that helps shape lives, support personal growth and positivity, and be impactful in many ways. The truth is, "We are better together."

Our community at Christy's Corner Cafe is multifaceted. It includes our management team, job coaches, Special Forces (those we strive to serve with exceptionalities), Engaging Opportunities Foundation (EOF), and its Board of Directors, as well as our loyal customers, donors, family members, and surrounding communities.

EOF was established in memory of my sister, Christy, in 2018, with the doors of Christy's Corner Cafe' opening in the fall of 2019. This was 6 months before COVID-19 hit in full force. We went from full-time hours, 6 days/week, to state-wide mandates related to COVID-19. First, this limited the number of diners allowed to one-half capacity. Then indoor dining was eliminated, and finally, the state mandated the closure of our business. We created the "Christy's Cares Program" due to the large number of perishable products and the concern for our many regular customers. We set to work emptying our freezers and refrigerators, preparing products, delivering food, and performing wellness and safety checks on those in our community. During COVID, we delivered to first responders, healthcare workers, and other essential workers. We partnered with local food pantries to identify those in need. Because it is sometimes difficult for people to ask for help, we strive to assist confidentially. As people became aware of our program, our community not only **LISTENED**, but grew. Even today, we continue to receive donations from individuals and businesses to support this program. We have provided funeral food for families and extended families dealing with unanticipated out-of-town guests.

We are contacted frequently with inquiries for food assistance not only by those in need but also by friends or neighbors who know of someone who can use some help. We have collaborated with other community groups, so our care packages sometimes include blankets (made by our employees, which help with their traumatic brain injury recovery), socks, toiletries, and even cleaning supplies as we work together to **LISTEN**. We have had conversations with folks who said they were directed to us by others in the community who sent them our way with the understanding that we would do our best to meet their needs. Our program is expanding this month as we implement a weekend food package because we are **LISTENING** to the difficulties some in our community face in securing food on the weekends. We have a "PAY IT FORWARD" tab at the cafe, where customers will frequently purchase meals for those who may need an extra hand and come to our door. Our employees have been impacted in numerous ways as they have developed new skills, enjoy being a part of a community, and can give back to a community that has always supported them. Our community continues to grow in ways we never imagined as we continue to **LISTEN**.

### Discussion Questions

1. How has God revealed Himself in your community?
2. What obstacles do you see that could interfere with your listening to your community?

### Prayer

*We thank you, Father, for opening our ears, to listen to the needs of those in our community. Help us to serve one another with a happy heart as you commanded in John 15:12-13: "My commandment is that you love and unselfishly seek the best for one another, as I have loved you." In your name we pray, Amen.*