

Life Group Preparation Notes:
Emotionally Healthy Relationships
Session 5 - Pre-Session Reading
Listen Incarnationally

The fruit of a mature spirituality is to be an incarnational presence to another person. It was for Jesus. It is, I believe, for all his followers. . . .

When is the last time someone said to you, “Let me tell you about those Christians—they are fantastic listeners! I have never seen a group of people more interested to know my world, curious, asking questions—listening to me!” . . .

Give yourself this little listening test. Circle all the statements you can affirm.

1. My close friends would describe me as a responsive listener.
2. When people are upset with me, I am able to listen to them without being defensive.
3. I listen not only to the words people say but also to the feelings behind their words and their body language.
4. I have little interest in judging other people or quickly giving my opinion to them.
5. I am able to validate another person’s feelings with empathy.
6. I am aware of my defensive mechanisms in stressful conversations (e.g. appeasing, ignoring, blaming, distracting).
7. I am profoundly aware of how the family I was raised in has shaped my present listening style.
8. I ask for clarification when listening rather than “fill in the blanks” or make assumptions.
9. I don’t interrupt to get my point across when another is speaking.
10. I give people my undivided attention when they are talking to me.

If you circled 8–10 statements, you are an outstanding listener; if you circled 6–7, you are very good; 4–5, good; 3 or fewer, poor—“you are in trouble.” If you want to be

really brave, after you score yourself, ask your spouse or someone close to you to rate you as a listener. You may be surprised. . . .

The great challenge in incarnation, for most of us, is to hold on to ourselves and not to lose ourselves when we enter another person's world. To do so is to be like Jesus. The apostle John records that prior to Jesus' washing his disciples' feet, he "knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God" (John 13:3). Jesus never ceased to be God when he took on human flesh and became one of us.

At New Life, we have people from over seventy-three different countries. Almost one-fourth are African American and West Indian. Another third are Asian (Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Filipino, etc.). The rest are Hispanic, Jewish, Eastern European, African and Anglo. I am a second-generation Italian-American. While I am called to go into other people's worlds, it is necessary that I do not lose my God-given self in the process.

In order to be an emotionally and spiritually mature disciple of Jesus, this is perhaps the most difficult, challenging principle to apply. Without this, you end up a chameleon like Leonard Zelig.

Woody Allen, in his movie *Zelig*, traces the life of a human chameleon named Leonard Zelig. He becomes a celebrity in the 1920s due to his unique power and ability to look and act like whoever is around him—Black, Indian, obese, Chinese, Scottish—you name it, and Zelig becomes it. This human chameleon has no identity or "self" of his own. He becomes whomever he is around. He jokes with prizefighter Jack Dempsey. He is with Hitler on the speaker's platform at Nuremberg.

Zelig assumes whatever strong personalities he meets up with. With the Chinese he is straight out of China. With rabbis, he miraculously grows a beard and side curls. With psychiatrists, he repeats their jargon and strokes his chin as if he were a wise man. At the Vatican he is part of Pope Pius XI's clerical attendants. As a chameleon, he changes color, accent, and shape as the world around him changes. Everywhere he simply conforms. He wants only to be safe, to fit in, to be accepted, to be liked. He is famous for being nobody, a nonperson.¹

At times we empathize *too* much. Out of fear we (sometimes) do not assert our

preferences and point of view. And we lose ourselves in the process. Remember, Jesus is our model. He became fully man, but he remained fully God. . . .

At the same time, Jesus also hung between two worlds: heaven and earth. Life would have been much simpler for Jesus if he stayed in heaven with the Father. This world, for Jesus, was not safe. But by entering our world, he invited sorrow and pain into his life. He was misunderstood and not appreciated. He died a naked, lonely death on a cross, hanging literally between heaven and earth.

It was, in a word, messy.

Jesus said, “Students are not above their teacher, nor servants above their master” (Matthew 10:24). You and I may not die literally on a cross as Jesus did, but we will die in other ways when we incarnate. It costs time, energy, and, almost always, a disruption to our risk-free world.

When we choose to incarnate, we hang between our own world and the world of another person. We are called to remain faithful to who we are, not losing our essence, while at the same time entering into the world of another. We can be assured, however, that as Jesus’ incarnation and death brought great life, so our choice to do the same will also result in resurrection life and much fruit in us and others.

—Adapted from *The Emotionally Healthy Church*,
pages 189, 190, 193–194, 196

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