

4th Sunday of Easter – May 11, 2014

“*The Sense of Hearing: Listening for the Shepherd*” - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:19-25; Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

This morning, as I read the Gospel passage, I encourage you to really pay attention what hearing is like. Pay attention to the sound of my voice, the sounds around you, the way sound feels. To help, I am going to step behind the screen here and read the Gospel of John. This way, you won't have any visual cues for the reading, just the sense of hearing alone:

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The experience of hearing encompasses many things. If I were to speak of a favorite sense, I would have to say mine is hearing. Hearing, for me, is the sense that tells me where I am in the world. When I walk around town, I find it very difficult to wear headphones because I get my cues about where things are from hearing perhaps even more than seeing. I feel very unsafe when I close down my hearing of the world. My experience of hearing involves a sense of space, awareness of distance, tones and timber of daily life. If I have any synesthesia, which is the crossing over of senses into other senses, it is in my hearing. Sometimes, when listening to music, I see shapes and colors. I feel forms and contours. Of all my senses, it is the one I trust the most.

My first experience of the real power of hearing came when I was in the 4th grade. My friend Gregg Loomis invited me to his house. In his living room, we sat on the floor. He said, “*Listen to this*”, and put the **Kiss Alive 2** album on the turntable. It was my first real exposure to Rock and Roll. In a single moment, my perception of the universe unfolded into multiple dimensions. I mean that quite literally. For me, hearing is a multi-dimensional experience. My whole field of perception was opened up by Ace Frehley on the guitar, the thumping bass of Gene Simmons, the sultry, gravely voice of Paul Stanley and the steady rhythm of Peter Criss.

From there, Gregg refined my hearing by introducing me to Aerosmith's **Toys in the Attic**, and then the standard for all Rock and Roll, Jimi Hendrix's **Are You Experienced?** Album. It is through Rock and Roll that I began to appreciate the classical music my mom played all the time and it is through Rock and Roll that I fell in love with music as a form of language and communication.

How we hear and what we experience from what we hear is a highly subjective thing. I know many of you do not like Aerosmith or Jimi Hendrix, and consider Rock and Roll to be a kind of noise pollution, but to quote AC/DC “*Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution; Rock and Roll's Just Rock and Roll*”. It is important for us to understand, though, that we cannot really separate what we hear from our personal experience of what we hear. This is why communicating with one another is a delicate and tricky thing.

When Jesus says sheep will follow the voice of their leader, it is because sheep are entrained and raised to listen for it. In a pasture, many herds can be together and when the shepherd calls for his sheep, only those sheep will separate and follow their shepherd. The others will stay until they are called. Regardless of your judgment of sheep, this kind of hearing requires sensitivity and attention. We cannot presume, as followers of Jesus, to simply follow any voice. We must listen for the one who has chosen us and listen for the voice of the one who leads us. This means filtering out the noise, means training the ear to hear regardless of the other noise around us. It is an active attention, not a passive following. More than any other sense, I think, hearing requires constant attention in order to hear the presence of the Shepherd.

In the Hebrew language, the word for hearing and the word for obeying are the same – *Shema*. Likewise, in Greek, one of the meanings for the word for hearing is “to follow or obey”. It is important that we understand the language of Scripture presents multiple meanings for hearing. Just as language and your hearing of it functions differently from how you hear a piece of music, so also how we understand what we have heard functions differently according to what is spoken or performed. Romans 10:17 says, *Faith comes through hearing*. But what do we listen for, and how shall we respond to what we hear?

The early church, going all the way back to St Gregory in the 300s, spoke of the Art of Listening. I had a choir teacher in middle school who worked hard to teach us how to listen to music. He would put on different pieces of music and then ask us to listen for different instruments. Sometimes, we would have to listen for a while before we could discern the violin under the cellos. He would point out where the oboe would break out of the chordal arrangement and take over the melody. He would have us listen for themes that would resolve and come together in symphonies by Mozart and Beethoven. The exploration of sound was entrancing and I have loved it ever since.

How we hear spoken words is similar to how we listen to music, but it requires *listening*. The art of listening is also the art of self-reflection and self-control. We can listen out of pride or we can listen out of understanding. When we listen out of pride, we are only interested in the sound of our own thoughts and voice. When I listen out of pride, I seek to impose myself on the conversation. I make sure my perspective gets heard by everyone else, whether I have heard what they had to say or not. Proud listening gives free reign to my judgments and prejudices and makes sure they get heard by everyone else regardless of what is being said by them. Proud listening is reactive listening and “*is an act of pride...a desire for the listener to be the center of attention*” (from an article “*The Art of Listening*” found at www.truthandcharity.net).

This can take the form of something my grandmother participated in, which is called *selective hearing* – hearing only what conforms to your worldview, or worse, turning the words of another so that they match what you wish to believe. Selective hearing also has great benefits because, even if you heard things that you disagree with, you can quell arguments by hearing only the positive things as well. For those on the other side of it, selective hearing can be infuriating. Dietrich Bohoeffler, the great Lutheran pastor and theologian during World War 2, taught his students that “*...impatient listening is a form of despising other people*” (from an article by Dallas Roark at www.religion-online.org).

Somehow, we have to listen in such a way that we become like the sheep in the field and are always and everywhere, as 1 Peter says, “returning to the shepherd of our souls. The Art of Listening means we begin listening for *understanding*, rather than listening out of pride. Saint Gregory said in one of his sermons, “*Believe that listening is always less dangerous than talking, just as learning about God is more pleasant than teaching.*” Being a sheep to the Great Shepherd means many things, but when it comes to the sense of hearing, listening for the Shepherd means we must put away our pride. As John the Baptist says when his disciples are considering whether to continue following him or to follow Jesus, “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*” True listening means we decrease. True listening means our voice diminishes and we allow others to speak.

Active listening or the art of listening is a discipline which has great spiritual benefit. The more we develop an attitude of listening for understanding the more we begin to hear the Shepherd calling us. Listening

in this way does not lead to a blind obedience, but rather a following born of attention, sensitivity and delicacy. Following Jesus becomes like listening for the individual instruments of an orchestra and our attention to others begins to model the gentleness of a true shepherd with his sheep. Listening becomes an act of love. Brenda Ueland, a writer from Minnesota, said, *“I have come to think listening is love, that's what it really is.”* Listening is love. Jesus says in John 13,

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

1 John 4 says, *“God is love.”* If listening is love, then loving one another is listening to one another. Just as Jesus has listened to you, you also should listen to one another.

Why should we do this? What value is there in listening? Jesus tells us today that he has come to give us life and give it abundantly. We make the mistake in thinking our lives will only be meaningful if we assert our knowledge and voice into the conversation that throngs and swarms all around us. If you know I am here, *you will know I am here!* So we speak loudly, we become provocative so people will listen to us, we present our opinions as if they were foregone facts and expect others to conform to the facts we have created from our opinions. We give into pride and become a wolf in the pasture of sheep.

Christ followers are Shepherd Listeners. We listen everywhere for the presence of Christ, because we know that he has made himself present in the Resurrection. When we become listeners for the Shepherd, we begin to love one another. And it is in loving one another that abundant life becomes possible. What does that look like? Acts 2 tells us:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

A listening community, a community who listens for their Shepherd, who listens for the Resurrected Christ among them, becomes a loving community who serves God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pope Francis, in his recent writing *Evangelium Gaudium*, says,

“We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. It is an openness to heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter paths of true growth and awaken a yearning: the desire to respond fully to God's love and bring to fruition what he has sown in our hearts.”

We need to treasure the experience of hearing and open our sense of hearing to the presence of Jesus in all places. The power of hearing is in the dimensions of love and care which become available when we truly listen, listen without pride and instead listen for understanding.

The call of the Shepherd may be in the majesty of the organ, the rhythm and melody of the piano, the voices of the choir, the sound of the building, the voice of the upset person, the mourning person, the happy person, the music on the radio, or in the sound of the birds that woke you up this morning. The sense of

hearing is the avenue of communication with the world, and in the art of listening we learn to love. In loving, we become even more sensitive to the sound of the Shepherd's call to us in every part of our lives.
Amen.