

Sunday, February 2, 2025

Morning Message:

Will you pray with me? Source of truth and love, we yearn for certainty in an uncertain world. Grant us two ears to hear the words you would have us hear, and then grant us the courage, each with our one mouth, to proclaim them. When we fear that others will not hear in the spirit in which we speak, give us your hope for our collective future, I pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

As God's creation, all our senses are useful when they are attuned to God's purposes, and then activated by them. As we move through February and toward Lent, we will focus on what it means to hear first and then be heard, by attending to Jesus's words in several stories from Luke's Gospel. "Two Ears, One Mouth." And yet, we know that Jesus is about far more than his words. His actions, his relationships, all of who he is and has always been speak volumes to us who strive to be disciples. In these weeks, may we comprehend what it means to hear, to listen first, and then to attend to God's Spirit in every situation.

It's very easy, particularly these days, it seems, to get overwhelmed by, and even lost in all the voices around us, especially the ones that strive to shape our perspectives, our opinions, our beliefs, and even our values. But there's no way to avoid the inevitability that there are always going to be voices around us that are challenging and difficult to hear – those with whom we disagree, those that are frustrating to us, those that feel threatening to us and to those we love. Before us this day, we have the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and Jesus. From their words, let us hear God's truth in ways that strengthen us in our struggles, to hear and then proclaim God's mercy, God's grace, God's love. Both of the passages from Jeremiah and the Gospel of Luke compel us to listen for the full meaning of being called by God. And they set a high bar for hearing, recognizing, and embracing God's call. Yet, let us remember that Christian calling is not just reserved for those asked to do mighty things. Most of us are called to do small things in a mighty way!

We find the story of Jesus returning to Nazareth and his hometown synagogue in Luke 4. It began with great promise as Jesus stood up and read Isaiah's description of the promised Messiah: one who would bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the captives. Then Jesus claimed that this prophecy was being fulfilled in their midst. His neighbors and friends

surely looked at each other and smiled. Ah yes – the year of the Lord’s favor, right here in Nazareth! Their pleasure, pride, and their amazement were reflected in the question they raised in verse 22: “Is not this Joseph’s son?” A son of their own community had achieved notoriety in other places, like Capernaum, and word had reached his hometown. But then, suddenly, their expressions began to change, as they realize that Jesus’s interpretation of those words from Isaiah was the fulfillment of prophecy, but not in the way they expected to hear it. And so their pride began to turn to anger.

Welcomed by the hometown crowd, adored by many as he stood to read and sits to preach, Jesus soon became controversial. He incited their fury with the words we find in vv. 23-24, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself! Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did in Capernaum.’ Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” “Doctor, cure yourself” meant bringing promised relief to his own people, not allowing a place like Capernaum to get the benefits that the hometown crowd should have. Charity begins at home, after all! But Jesus turned the tables on them, proclaiming that the miracles and healing and release and freedom were not – are not – for the select few, but are God’s gifts poured out for all – foreigners as well as the hometown folk.

Yes, Jesus couldn’t seem to leave well enough alone. And so, as the Nazareth folk listened, he went on to remind them that the ancient prophets Elijah and Elisha didn’t focus on the widows and the lepers of Israel, but instead brought good news and healing to outsiders – a widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. When there was famine in the land during the time of Elijah, the prophet was sent to a widow not in Israel but at Zarephath in Sidon. And when there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha, only one leper was cleansed and healed of his affliction: Naaman, in Syria. In these two instances, God chose foreigners over the faithful—a theme Jesus repeated when he visits Capernaum before traveling to Nazareth. Upon hearing Jesus’s words, the people in Nazareth turned on him with deadly violence. They didn’t just shift uneasily in their seats or begin to have second thoughts. They didn’t even get up and storm out of the synagogue in a huff. They stayed put, as the audacity of what Jesus was saying started to sink in. God’s good news wasn’t just for them? At that point, they closed their ears to the message Jesus was speaking, without trying to understand it, and moved straight to knee-jerk reaction. The people jumped up, drove Jesus out of town, and very nearly off the nearby cliff. Some homecoming!

This is indeed a troubling look at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry. As we poke at it, we find that Luke’s description of this situation has at least two levels of meaning – first, for the people of Nazareth in the story, and second, for Luke’s intended audience, which was the post-resurrection church. First, there was the open affirmation of the Jewishness of Jesus and his message. He was a Galilean Jewish teacher – a rabbi – but he was also the Messiah for the world, with a global mission. As such, there was tension in some of the early churches, between the Jewish Christians and the converted Gentiles. Some of the Jewish Christians of Luke’s day felt like the Nazarenes listening to Jesus read Scripture. They were pleased with the idea of “hometown boy makes good” (“hometown” in their case meaning “Jewish like us”) but were not so comfortable with the idea that the glorious prophecies of their tradition, the “year of the Lord” Isaiah spoke about, would apply to everyone. They wanted to hold back for themselves this light that Jesus wanted to share with the whole world. To them, Jesus was not a “Light to the Nations,” but rather, a “Light to Their Nation.” Luke shared this story of Jesus’s rejection by his hometown folk to set the stage for the rest of his Gospel. Jesus, who brought then, and brings now, a message of freedom for the oppressed, hope to the poor, and release to the captives, just passes through this potentially deadly encounter, all the while providing a symbolic image of his prophetic teaching. Luke wants to show us that rejection born of a failure to listen and hear for understanding does not bring an end to God’s purpose in Jesus Christ, but only serves to further it. In these divisive times, in which many believe that unity must consist solely of uniformity, this is good news!

From both Luke and Jeremiah, we are reminded of what God wants us to hear and understand. Before we can choose God, God has already chosen us, and has even, at times, chosen us against our own will. God sought Jeremiah from the very beginning, and by responding to Jeremiah’s every objection, there was no way for him to slip away from God and go on his merry way. God had him. This is what God has in mind for each of us, I believe – some moment, some awareness, when we first/when we finally say “yes” to God. God gives us, over and over, opportunities to respond. We can listen but not hear, hear but not respond, respond but not follow through. We can be filled with anger, as were those in the temple in Nazareth who heard Jesus when he came home and spoke of the new definition of God’s favor. We can be quietly indifferent. Or we can – and indeed, we are called to – follow and contribute to that renewing, redeeming story that is God’s powerful story.

Jesus's revelation that God's good news is for the whole world, not just those of us who have known Jesus all our lives, shouldn't offend us or make us want to run Jesus off a cliff. It's not a threat but an invitation. Jesus is indeed bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, all of it. God relentlessly calls us to be a part of it. Not through our achievement of perceived power separate from God, nor through our confidence in our own abilities are we qualified to answer the call of God. It is Jesus who shows us how to live into and out of the call for which God created us – Jesus, who welcomes us to the Table of his holy love, to share the bread of life and the cup of salvation – Jesus, who paid it all, that we might know the full love of God. Let us hear God's invitation to the Lord's Table – an open invitation to the table that is larger than any of us can comprehend...