

Sermon: Pentecost 15

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September 6, 2015

Year B
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-10, 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

Can you hear me... can you hear me now... are you listening to me... why do I have to repeat myself so many times... if I've said it once I've said it a thousand times... my words have landed on deaf ears... do you actually hear what you're saying...

There are plenty of sayings about hearing... about listening... the sense of hearing is considered by most people to be second only to sight... and there are some very moving videos on YouTube... of people hearing for the first time... young children and adults... people who may have received cochlear implants or some other new device... people who've never heard... and who now can hear their spouse or partner... their children... their parents... a sister or brother...

We can certainly communicate in other ways... through writing... with sign language... morse code... in binary code... even smoke signals... but there's way more information when someone speaks and someone hears: volume... inflection... tone of voice... articulation... rate of speech... and emotion...

In the summer of 2008... while I was in seminary... I spent ten weeks doing Clinical Pastoral Education... I both learned CPE... and practiced CPE... I learned to listen not just to what was being said... but to listen for what was not being said... I learned to listen for what people really meant... even when they may have said something different... I tried to learn to listen... not just with my ears... but with my heart... and people would sometimes say more... by what they weren't saying... than by what they did say...

I've never been in the hospital before... might also have meant *I feel afraid and out of control*... My family lives out of state... might also have meant *I have no one here to take care of me and I feel alone*... They say they're not sure what's wrong with me... might also have meant *I'm afraid I'm going to die*...

We didn't put words into people's mouths... but tried to listen for what was being said offstage... in the wings... bring it onstage... shine a spotlight on it... applaud loudly... meet those words with appreciation... encourage them...

And what I realized in this practice... what I experienced over and over again... was that there was a choice... we can rely on people to say what they mean and mean what they say... expect them to clearly and unambiguously name and articulate what they think and what they feel... let them be responsible for that so we don't have to guess at it or read minds...

Or we can help them along... we can ask clarifying questions... tell them what we're hearing... and ask if that's what they mean... and because so many of our words rise up out of an emotional realm... we can also help them name those feelings... so they can really be... and feel... understood...

Today's reading from Isaiah talks about the kind of seeing... hearing... and speaking that God wants for us and will bring when God comes... and there's a very telling verse just a few chapters later... Isaiah writes... *Morning by morning the Lord wakes me... and chisels out the stone from my ears... so that I may listen like one being taught*... that really says something about what God thinks of our ability to hear... doesn't it...

And today's Gospel instructs us too about speaking and hearing... we have to remember... Jesus has just defended the disciples against Pharisees who take them to task for eating with defiled hands... and Jesus turns to the crowds... and re-frames the Law for them... he says... it's not what goes into a person that defiles... but that which

comes out... Jesus himself proclaims that what you say matters... and if what you say matters... then how you say it matters too...

Now... far away in Tyre... almost like heading up into Canada... away from the influence of Roman law and Temple Law... an outsider woman invites a question... is the Holy Spirit present here...

When Matthew tells today's story about this woman and her daughter... Jesus says that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... but Melissa Florer-Bixler writes that in his ministry Jesus has blurred all the traditions set up to protect the law... all the boundary lines that have kept so many different kinds of outsiders at a distance... but now... here... this boundary *breaker* is asked to look back... because this outsider woman begs Jesus... who said when he read from the scroll of Isaiah... that scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing... this outsider woman begs Jesus to be who he has claimed to be... and asks him to discern if the Gospel... if good news... has indeed been preached here... and to her...

That's why I think it's almost impossible to really hear today's Gospel... without hearing Jesus claiming *Jewish Privilege*... and this mother whose daughter has the demon of discrimination... countering with *Syrian Lives Matter* ... she challenges Jesus... sees something that his privilege... and maybe his fatigue... keeps him from seeing... keeps him from hearing... she has to ask Jesus... do you actually hear what you're saying...

And then Jesus seems to have an epiphany... Jesus has a change of heart... only then can he understand her cries for justice... not as a threat to the Jewish people... but as a demand for God's justice...

I'm going to read a PG-13 poem written by a woman named Warsan Shire... I've omitted one word I'm uncomfortable saying here... but they're her words... it's called Home...

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well.

Your neighbors running faster than you, your breath... bloody in their throats
and the boy you went to school with who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body.

You only leave home when home won't let you stay.

No one leaves home unless home chases you, fire under feet, hot blood in your belly
and even then... you carry the anthem under your breath, only tearing up your passport
in airport toilets, sobbing

as each mouthful of paper made it clear that you would not be going back.

You have to understand,

no one would put their children in a boat unless the sea is safer than the land.

No one burns their palms under trains, beneath carriages.

No one spends days and nights in the gall bladder of a truck feeding on newspaper
unless the miles travelled mean something more than journey.

No one crawls under fences,

wants to be beaten, wants to be pitied.

No one chooses refugee camps or strip searches where your body is left aching,
or prison, because prison is safer than a city of fire,

and one prison guard is safer than fourteen men who look like your father.

No one could take it.

Could stomach it.

No one's skin would be tough enough.

"Go home blacks", "refugees", "dirty immigrants", "asylum seekers".

"Sucking our country dry".

"With their hands out". "They smell strange", "savage".

"Messed up their own country and now they want to mess up ours?"

How do the words "dirty looks" roll off your back?

And maybe it's because the blow is softer than a limb torn off.

Or the words are more tender than fourteen men between your legs.

Insults are easier to swallow than rubble, than bone, than your child's body in pieces.

"I wanna go home."

But home is the mouth of a shark.

Home is the barrel of a gun.

And no one would leave home unless home chases you to the shore.

Unless home told you to quicken your legs.

Leave your clothes behind. Crawl for the desert.

Wade for the oceans.

Drown. Save. Be hungry. Beg.

Forget pride, your survival is more important.

No one leaves home unless home is a sweaty voice in your ear, saying

"Leave. Run away from me now. I don't know what I've become,
but I know that anywhere is safer than here."

These words capture... what many around the world experience... they're similar to what some of the elders in our ESL community experienced as they fled Bhutan and spent decades in refugee camps in Nepal and India... their priest Krishna said it was their community's *Slaughter of the Innocents*... and these words wouldn't be much different from what Syrian refugee Abdullah Kurdi might have written... before he lost his entire family this week... similar to what we might have written when we saw that photo of his two-year-old son's lifeless body on a Turkish beach... after a journey that was supposed to take him to a safe home...

Jesus travels into unfamiliar territory... and bring's God's justice to an outsider... he opens the ears and mouth of a nameless man... and the people could not be quieted... we were opened some by God this week... but unlike the deaf man's friends... we are

silenced too easily... so what should we think... what should we believe... how do we allow God to chisel our ears open far enough... so that what we in this country see and hear... makes its way to our hearts... how can we possibly look people who have suffered this kind of loss in the eyes... and say: *I've come only for my own people*... do we in America collectively think it unfair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs... or do we too have an abundance of justice...

I think we need to practice... to listen past the words to the feelings underneath... and stop the intellectual efforts at making them right or wrong... worthy or unworthy... I think the leaders of this country need to lead us all... into making ourselves vulnerable and compassionate enough to feel the hopes and despair these refugees feel... the truth is we're all in the same boat... or the same hospital bed... and when we really hear... when we learn to hear with our hearts... when the prophecy of Isaiah is realized... we must answer these questions about any kind of privilege with a resounding NO... and then our corporate religion... our faith... no matter what name we give it... will lead us all into life-giving territory... and into life-giving action... and I pray God help us speed that day...

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