

An Incredible Gift of Hearing

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday – May 19, 2024

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How good is your hearing? Five years ago, mine was getting steadily worse. Earlier in life I'd spent too much time operating power tools with no ear protection whatsoever. As a result, I couldn't tell if a person's name was Bill or Phil or Will. So, I got hearing aids.

How good is your hearing? Beyond basic auditory capacities, I wonder how many problems show up in our world—employer-employee, parents-children, Democrats-Republicans—because we have trouble hearing each other?

I remember back to when my son Erik was 13 years old. We went for a bike ride one evening. We were having a splendid time pedaling around our neighborhood in south Minneapolis. And then we started a conversation that did not go well. Erik was in early adolescence, forming some definite opinions. As the bike ride continued, the conversation got more difficult. As a parent, I felt like Erik was challenging me, and I didn't like it! At one point, I said rather strongly, "Erik, remember, I am the parent. You are the child. Do you know what that means?" Erik stopped pedaling for a moment, shrugged nonchalantly, and responded, "Dad, you bore Let's just say, if Erik was trying to push my buttons, it worked. I turned my bike around faster than ice cream melts on a hot summer day. We were going home and we were going to talk about this...now!

We found a spot in the family room. I started in: "Erik, why did you say that to me? It was disrespectful!" *Silence*. "Do you have anything else to add?" *More silence*. Finally, with a mixture of hurt and bewilderment in his voice, Erik responded, "Dad, you asked what it means that you are the parent. So I answered, "You...*bore* me. You were there when I was born." All due respect to Erik's mother, but right then I felt about two feet tall. I'd completely misheard what my son was saying. And I'd ruined a perfectly good bike ride in the process. All because of some very poor hearing.

Anything like that ever happen to you? Probably so. Good hearing can be hard to come by. Turn on a TV talk show and you'll probably find folks angrily shouting at each other. Watch a debate in Congress and you're likely to see plenty of legislators posturing for the camera, but very few actually listening to

each other. Sit down to a rare family dinner and sometimes, instead of catching up on the day's events, you end up in a heated argument.

So, what do you do? Is there a remedy for people with hearing problems? I think so, but in this case it goes way beyond hearing aids and therapy sessions. It's called Pentecost. Pentecost is God's gift to help us hear better.

The first-century setting is 50 days after Passover. Jews from around the world are in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. It's one of the big three – Passover, Tabernacles and Pentecost. At Pentecost, they're celebrating the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. Picture it: the whole Jewish world gathered in one place; they're speaking mostly Hebrew – but they've got every dialect under the sun; it's a babbling confusion; people are hardly able to hear and understand each other.

With all this going on, Jesus' closest followers – uneducated, barely-ready-for-prime-time Galileans – are huddled in the upper room, the place of the Last Supper. Their lives are on hold. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he told them to wait for “power from on high.” What exactly that means, they're not sure. So they go to the upper room, lock the doors, and wait.

But listen! A breeze begins to blow. Suddenly there's the rush of a violent wind, a swelling of voices, a shaking of the foundations. The Spirit of God descends and turns their world upside down. The doors of the upper room burst open. And the frightened followers of Jesus are pushed out onto the street. Only now they're displaying a courage that they did not have before.

What's going on? The disciples are raising a holy ruckus! They're speaking in all sorts of languages. That's incredible enough for a bunch of uneducated Galileans, but even more incredible is that God's people from around the world are able to hear and understand them...in their native languages.

They hear Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, quoting the prophet Joel and saying, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.” They hear him say: “Your sons and your daughters shall see visions and dream dreams.” And most importantly they hear: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” And somehow, miraculously, they're able to take to heart what Peter is telling them – that the one they call “Lord” is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified and raised from the dead.

Nadia Bolz-Weber writes: “I need a God who is bigger and more nimble and mysterious than what I can understand or control. Otherwise, it can feel like I’m worshipping nothing more than my own ability to understand the divine.” I don’t know if Nadia was picturing Pentecost when she wrote this, but she might as well have been.

On the day of Pentecost, God’s sends the Holy Spirit – nimble, mysterious, beyond our control – to make God bigger and to help God’s people hear better. And in that hearing, a church is born. Hearts are changed. Doors get opened. And the church is given a mission that it did not have before: to share the good news of Jesus’ love with a world that’s often hanging on by a thread.

Friends, be sure to notice what *doesn’t* happen on Pentecost. The Spirit doesn’t come to solve all our problems. The Spirit doesn’t tell us who we’re supposed to welcome inside our doors; what kind of worship we’re supposed to use; whether we should be Lutherans or Catholics or Methodists. Instead, the Spirit creates a far larger set of problems and suddenly there’s no turning back.

You see, the Spirit has a way of pushing shy, huddled believers out into the world. And eventually, they’re sharing Jesus’ love not just with Jewish people but with Gentiles too. The Spirit prompts people like us to look around at our neighborhoods and ask: *As an Easter people, what makes us come alive? Why not find out what that is and then do it?* No doubt, the answer to this question gives us a mission that can turn the world upside down!

Do you catch what I’m saying? Our mission starts with our hearing....and then responding to the “problems” the Spirit creates for us. This can be incredibly hard work! In a world with too many silos, in which we’re often closed off from those who don’t think and vote and look like us, our hearing has gotten increasingly worse.

Still, there are plenty of folks hanging on by a thread: lonely people needing connecting; hurting people needing someone to care; hungry people needing something to eat; neighbors needing to act like – well – neighbors. And dare I say, any of these connections will go better if we work toward building a bridge instead of a wall, and if we ask the Spirit to help us hear each other better. Once we stop to listen, I think, God has any number of people to send our way. Ministries such as the Wells Area Food Shelf, the Clothes Closest, and Meals on Wheels are ways to respond. So are Confirmation Mentoring, the Backpack Program, and Caring Ministry for those who are homebound. Other efforts are

less formal, but every bit as important: driving a neighbor to the doctor, helping a friend with homework, listening to a person who's lost a loved one. A little like those disciples waiting in the upper room, each of our efforts push us out of our comfortable surroundings. We end up serving a God who is bigger and more nimble and mysterious than we could ever understand or control. And as an Easter people, that makes us truly come alive!

Isn't that the way the Spirit often works? I think so. But keep in mind: the missional opportunities in front of us are rarely convenient. And we're never quite sure what we're getting into. Still, if we're listening, the nudge of the Spirit will go something like this: "I could use somebody like you. Do you want to help?"

As we follow the lead of the Spirit, we do the work of the church. It's often complicated and messy. There's no one right way to share the love of Jesus. Sometimes we'll have disagreements and more questions than answers. Sometimes, when our plates are full, we'll have to say *no*. Sometimes we might even feel like we've failed. Still, if the cross of Christ teaches us anything, it teaches us that success does not always look like success. And in the end, the question really isn't whether we've been successful, but whether we've at least tried to be faithful.

As many of you know, I recently returned from a two-week trip to Turkey. There was a lot of ground to cover, any number of ancient sites to visit, and plenty of things to learn. On the last morning, our Turkish guide, Macit, gathered up the hearing devices we'd been using, and then he quipped, "I'm the voice you've been hearing in your ears for the past 12 days. And you'll probably keep hearing my voice for a long time to come." And we all laughed.

Friends, as I see it, Macit's comment is a great metaphor for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes to speak a word into our ears and eventually into our hearts. We strain to listen, because we sense it's important, especially in a world in which good hearing is in short supply. The Spirit comes to help us hear better. The Spirit comes to unlock our doors, give us hearts full of courage, and send us out into the world. The Spirit helps us dream dreams of what might be. Thus, the Spirit invites us, "I could use somebody like you. Do you want to help?"

Friends, how you answer that question can make all the difference in the world – for you and for others! Thanks be to God. Amen.