

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4: 14-21
January 21, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

I am in the process of preparing for my annual Lenten class which this year will focus on the spiritual practice of listening. Without giving away what I will be presenting, let me say that listening is more than the experience of hearing sound. Listening is what we do when we really want to understand and be influenced by what is being said; or, in the case of music, what is being played or sung.

Listening requires two important motivations. Most importantly, listening requires a *desire* to understand and be influenced. How many disagreements eventually get around to the frustrated declaration, “You are not *listening* to me!” By this the speaker means you do not understand what I am saying because you do not want to understand what I am saying. If you did want to understand what I am saying you would stop interrupting or coming up with counter arguments. In a really good disagreement, by which I mean a really *bad one*, the other party says, “No! It is you who aren’t listening to *me!*” The only way out of this unproductive and sometimes destructive interaction is for both participants to stop the reactive and defensive back and forth and recover the desire to truly listen.

The second and equally critical dimension of listening is that the one who is speaking truly *wants to communicate*. Sometimes I don’t care if you want to hear what I have to say. I am so hurt and angry that I am just going to let it fly. Maybe I hope you will fall on your knees and grovel before me begging for my forgiveness. Many an argument can be brought to some resolution when the one who is angry is able to communicate that she or he cares about the

other and wants to feel heard and understood. But without that deep desire to connect with the other person there is little hope of true listening taking place.

True communication happens when there is a deep desire to express something important in a way that can be understood *and* a desire to listen for what is being said in a way that is open to being influenced by what is said. Such communication seems very rare at least in the public arena and I suspect also in day to day interactions. A community committed to learning to listen and to speak in a way that invites listening will be a beacon of light.

One way of understanding the Bible is in this light. God earnestly wants to communicate love for his creation. God wants creation freely to receive his love and freely to be shaped by it. God wants all creation to become a reflection of the beauty and harmony that exists within God's heart.

The story of the Bible can be seen as a record of God's seeking to communicate and humanity's imperfect ability to listen. Indeed much of the Bible tells the story of humanity's flat our refusal to listen which is accompanied by disastrous consequences.

The passage we heard from the book of Nehemiah takes place in the context of the attempt of God's people to rebuild Jerusalem after their release from exile in Babylon. You will remember that before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah, as well as many others pled with the leaders and people to listen to God, to stop trusting in idols, money and military power and to return to listening to God and obeying God's commandments. With a very few exceptions this did not happen.

It is a tragic irony that when the promised destruction did come the people blamed God! Why would God do this to us? We still hear this question today. It is often the question of

people who have not been listening. So now the exile is over and God's people are rebuilding. This rebuilding is at one physical and spiritual. They are hard at work rebuilding the walls of the city and the structures within the city. But clearly that is not enough. They must be rebuilt spiritually as a people committed to the covenant contained in the Torah given by God to Moses.

The chapter we heard is profoundly moving. The people are called. They come by the hundreds. They stand in respect for the Torah. It is their way of saying, "We are ready to listen. We want to hear what God will say to us. We are willing to change our lives according to what we hear."

The people who gather no longer speak or read Hebrew. How will they understand what is being read? We hear of the need for the woman and men to "hear with understanding." "The ears of the people were attentive to the Law. They were helped to understand by leaders who would interpret the meaning. They gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. The last sentence states that the leaders interpreted the Hebrew into the languages of the people.

Notice how the readers/ interpreters and the people cooperate with the word of God being truly communicated. The people want to listen—to understand what is being said and be influenced by what they hear. The readers and interpreters are deeply motivated to present the Torah in a way that the people will be able to listen. That is they want to avoid putting obstacles in the way.

The success of this cooperative effort is evident at the conclusion. The people who have listened are struck to the heart that they have failed to listen to God and obey God's

commandments. They fall on their faces in weeping. This is a sign that they have heard. More than that, their humility and conviction reveal that their love for God has been reawakened. They have been restored to a true relationship with God.

Thus it is that Nehemiah and the other leaders speak comfort to the people. “Do not weep! Rejoice! Celebrate! Make booths and make ready to eat and drink to praise the God whose word, no matter how harsh at first hearing is guided exclusively by love. God rejoices that the people have truly listened. The people who have heard now hear the voice of love rather than judgment.

Many years later a man entered his home synagogue in Nazareth. Because he had gained a certain reputation for his teaching he was offered the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He clearly can read Hebrew and he does so. The scene is intended to connect with God’s historic attempts to communicate with his people, like Moses on Mt. Sinai and Ezra and Nehemiah reading the Law to the people.

Yet in light of what we have heard in the book of Nehemiah we are filled with curiosity or perhaps a sense of apprehension. We are told nothing about the interest of the gathered to truly listen. Do they want to hear and be influenced by what is said? Will the gathered in the synagogue complete the partnership in speaking and listening which creates the power of God’s word among people?

Jesus rolls up the scroll and returns it to the attendant. Returning to his place he says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

They have heard. Have they listened?

Amen.