

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 3, June 1, 2008, dedicated to my uncle, The Rev. Clip Higgins, the Spring 2008 Stephen Minister's Class, to Rev. Ron Botts who formed this class and the Stephen Ministry leadership team, Katherine Beckett and Rev. Barb Cunningham who guided this class and always to the glory of God!

“Listening Hearts”

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28; Matthew 8:1-4

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In the stillness of the setting sun just outside her bedroom window, I sat in silence holding her hand. She had reached her final stage of life in a state of fluctating consciousness. She knew that after months of battling brain cancer, her dying time was at hand. She knew that reversing the flow of life away from death was no longer an option. She knew that her minutes - not just her days - were numbered. She knew that each breath, each word, each moment was decisive as she prepared to transition from earthly life to life eternal.

We had offered all the “out loud prayers” that were in us. Now we listened. With eyes wide open we prayed in silence and we listened. We listened for her breath, for her words, for her heart. As the sun reached its western horizon, she left this world on the final beams of an early spring sunset.

As she breathed her last breath, my eyes turned to the circle around her. My heart listened to them as we held one another's warm and life-filled hands. Her husband of 58 years was there. Her daughter was there. Her granddaughters, there. There too was her

Stephen Minister.

No one had words for what we had witnessed - the silent transition of earthly life to life eternal. Later we would say that a part of heaven touched earth on that sunset and we would say that she was carried to heaven on the final beams of daylight. But, now only silence, grace, stillness, tears and the joy of knowing her suffering had ended and God's peace had come at last to our beloved. God's light guided our moments together. We would treasure this silence forever.

There is a grace of kind listening, as well as a grace of kind speaking. While some listen with an abstract air and others listen with a kind of interruptive ferocity, and still others listen only to catch the moment into which they can leap with commentary and critique, **the one who can listen with grace and kindness is the one we need most in our lives.**

You and I listen with our entire body and whole being. Our eyes listen when we look deeply into the eyes of others. Our hands listen when we hold the hands of others. Our feet listen when we feel the earth beneath - and our steps touch her gently. And certainly, our ears listen - when we allow them to. But, listening hearts are a gift from God. Listening hearts are the divine presence of God paying attention to everyday encounters.

It is the heart that stands for the center of our being at which we are truly "together." At the center we are together with ourselves. At the heart we are not split into intellect, will, emotions, mind and body. Together with God, the source of life and breath, it is to the center that we must return again and again if we are to take things to heart.

By listening to our **own** hearts, we will find ultimate meaning. For just as the hands perceive touch, the eyes light and the ears sound, the heart is the organ that finds ultimate meaning.

And we all need someone who will listen to our hearts. To listen deeply, to listen responsively, to listen with one's heart and

with one's whole being is a sacramental gift that few give and even fewer receive.

In Matthew 8, Jesus enters a great crowd having come down from the mountaintop. A leper approaches Jesus and asks to be made clean, (if Jesus chooses for him to be made clean). Jesus listens and responds, *"I do choose. Be made clean."* Jesus hears the man's heart. He listens to his deepest desire. He heals him in his greatest need. He cleanses the man.

Today, we consecrate our newest Stephen Ministers as those gifted to listen with their hearts. Jerome, Melody, Kelly, Anna, Virginia and Marilyn - you are gifted in your ministry of presence and in your listening. You will be healers in our midst.

Through the years, I have often said that I can tell when a Stephen Minister is effectively listening to their care receiver because their care receiver's eyes come back to life, they walk with their shoulders higher and their spirits are lightened. They know they have one other person on the journey of life and faith who is listening to them. And as you listen, they are being healed silently, prayerfully, gently and beautifully.

In our home, Susan has framed and hung a photograph of two young children standing by the ocean and listening to a conch shell. The words beneath the photo read:

Listening to your heart, finding out who you are, is not simple. It takes time for the chatter to quiet down. In the silence of "not doing," we begin to know what we feel. If we listen and hear what is being offered, then anything in life can be our guide. Listen.

In the words of Deuteronomy 10:13, Moses says (if we will but listen): *"Love the Lord your God and serve God with all your heart and all your soul."* I promise you, if you are patient and still, in the heart of your listening, God's love will grow in you. And as you grow in your love of God, you will also grow to love your neighbor as you grow to love yourself. Listen. Listen with your heart. Amen.

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