

# *“Come Out of the Ashes and Listen”*

*Ash Wednesday*

*Joel 2:1-2, 11-17; Psalm 51:1-17;  
II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Mt. 6:1-6, 16-21*

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*March 1, 2017*

From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017, dedicated in deep gratitude for the staff of First Church and always to the glory of God!

***“Come Out of the Ashes and Listen”***

*Joel 2:1-2, 11-17; Psalm 51:1-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Mt. 6:1-6, 16-21*

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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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The closing words of Epiphany on the Mountain of Transfiguration came from the mouth of God disclosed in a cloud. Just 72 hours ago, God declared: ***“This is my son, my beloved one. Listen to him.”*** Today, I invite you to lend your ears to the Lenten journey. Be open to what you hear – not only today but all 47 days (including each Lord’s Day), which will take us to the cross of Calvary

and then the dawning of Easter's glorious day of resurrection.

Today, I wonder aloud, when will we listen to God? Or in God's words to the disciples, when will we listen to Jesus – God's beloved Son?

I believe listening is a "sacrament of life." So, what is sacrament? And what is listening?

Sacrament is defined as a rite or a ritual in which God's saving grace is uniquely active and intimately revealed to us. In the 4th Century, Augustine defined a sacrament as a "visible sign of an invisible reality." A sacrament points us to embrace God's salvation. While we most often associate Baptism and Holy Communion as our sacraments (while other traditions say there are five or seven sacraments), I would like us to expand our experience and open our hearts and minds to the "sacraments of life" - those realities in which and through which God's grace and love is revealed in our lives. How is God working out salvation in the simple and splendid everyday experiences and encounters of life?

Listening is an active experience of involvement and commitment to another person. To truly listen is to

be present to the sacred nature of God which you experience and encounter in another person or in the world around you. We experience God's love and grace as present between ourselves and the other, when we listen. Listening is our deepest act of caring. When someone says of us, "*He is too busy for me,*" or "*she is too important to make time for me.*" What is really being said is, "*the person with whom I seek relationship and to whom I wish to extend myself, my soul is not listening.*"

**You can listen someone into existence.** That is what God does for us and what God invites us to do for others. Listening is compassion with one's whole being.

Jesus continually demonstrated the relationship between caring and listening. He listened to people's doubts, their testimonies of faith, to their cries for help coming from the emotional, physical, and spiritual suffering in their lives. He heard their words of praise and scorn. He recognized in both praise and scorn there were hidden messages which God would reveal in God's own time.

Before he said anything or took any action, Jesus allowed others to express themselves. For example, before Jesus healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman, he

allowed her time to give her testimony of faith (Matthew 15:21-28). Before Jesus expressed the good news of God's love for the world to Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), he allowed the teacher of the Jews the opportunity to raise his questions and concerns about Jesus' teachings. Before interpreting the fulfilled prophecies about himself on the Road to Emmaus, The Risen Christ encouraged the two men time and space to express their sadness, fears, and dismay over his crucifixion and feelings of confusion over reports of the resurrection (Lk 24:13-31).

Certainly, Jesus had the power to know people's hearts and minds before they expressed themselves. He could have "saved time" by healing, converting, and revealing truth to people without having to listen to them first. But, Jesus knew people need to be listened to. They needed to be heard. He knew that holiness and the sacred journey of each person is truly revealed when we listen to one another.

We live in a world that has lost touch with listening. Our ears are so often plugged with the noise and sounds of our times – so much so that we have forsaken the one immediately in front of us. Psychotherapy and counseling are growth industries because we are lonely and we need one other person to give us time, to listen to

us - no matter what the cost. On-line chat rooms and the explosion of text messaging have become venues through which we feel included and heard by others. Most behaviors of our children, our spouses, our partners and loved ones all our family members - which may seem extreme or out of character on the surface - come out of a deep need to be listened to.

Just before he was silenced by Pope John Paul II, Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff wrote of the spoken word:

*The written word can be erased, wiped out, destroyed. The spoken word cannot. It is uncontrollable... It is transcendent. Uttered in all one's personal solidity and maintained as one would maintain one life and honor, it is supremely the sacrament that reveals and communicates each person as an individual. You are what your word is. (One would hope and pray that is) mature, honest, and truthful. (Found in The Sacrament of Life ,Orbis Books, 1975).*

If we believe our spoken words matter, then it matters even more that we listen. Listening is the greatest gift we can offer to God and to other people.

Not knowing if his words would ever make it out of the prison cell in which the Nazis had placed him

before his execution, German Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

*The service one owes to others in the fellowship of believers is listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for your brothers and sisters is learning to listen to them . . . It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but lends us his ear. So it is God's work that we do for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them. Christians . . . so often think they must contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking" (Found in Letters and Papers from Prison, D. Bonhoeffer, 1950).*

Every Friday, for 20 years until the time of my doctoral studies and then the birth of my grandson, I worked as a volunteer in the public schools. Years ago, I worked with a child at Cedarwood Elementary School on the south side of Columbus. His name was Isaac. I was assigned each week to meet with Isaac, a six-year-old Kindergartener who would not talk with anyone at school. Although he talked at home, he never uttered a word at school. With no counselor on staff, the principal thought maybe I could get Isaac to talk. After all he said,

“you’re a pastor. You’re in the ‘Miracle Business.’” Each week I chattered into Isaac’s silence. I thought by talking to him, by asking him questions, I might open him to talking with me. It didn’t work. About half-way through the year, I decided to be still. We would spend our time drawing together. We read books silently (he turned the page when he was ready). Neither one of us said a word. On the surface, I had failed in my assignment to bring Isaac out of his silence. When the school year ended and we were parting, he handed me a note. It simply read, “Thank you for (h)earing me.” (There was no “h” in the kindergartner’s note).

“Thank you for earing me.” How powerful it is when someone “ears” what you have to say – even if all the talking is done in silence.

Listening is never simple, just as finding out who you really are is never simple. It takes time for the chatter to quiet down. Then, 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.

On this Ash Wednesday, as we venture into this season, we will hear new voices from the pulpit of First Church in Lent – five rising young preachers who will

bring a word from God. We will reflect on the six words of our long-range plan – not in an organizational way – but in a spiritual way. What do **Worship, Communicate, Welcome, Connect, Build, and Engage** mean to you? Pray about these words. Look for new ways to dream, envision, and create from these words.

Be still and Listen – to the still speaking, still small voice of God within you and all around you.

On this Ash Wednesday, come out of the ashes and Listen.

Finally, I ask you to listen carefully to this closing excerpt from T.S. Eliot's poem entitled, "Ash Wednesday." Listen especially as Eliot speaks to the "Word of God" the Logos, the Christ.

*If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent  
If the unheard, unspoken Word is unspoken, unheard;  
Still is the unspoken Word, the Word unheard.  
The word without a word, the Word within  
The world and for the world;  
And the light shone in the darkness and  
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled  
About the center of the silent Word.  
O my people, what have I done unto thee.*

*Where shall the word be found, where will the word  
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence . . .*

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