

“Fulfilled in Your Hearing”

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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From the Pulpit

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It is my distinct honor to be a guest preacher in this pulpit. I love this church. Since moving to Columbus last year, and now dividing my time between two offices and homes in Columbus and in Cleveland, I've had the opportunity to worship and gather here on several occasions. I am grateful for you.

I am especially grateful for Tim, Emily, and Mark's pastoral leadership, and this congregation's leadership, for justice and inclusion in our city and state,

As a UCC clergyperson, who spent 12 years in parish ministry and 17 years working at the UCC's national headquarters, I have long known the prominence of this great church.

Your reputation is so strong, but the impact of your outreach, the vitality of your worship and programming, and your commitment to the radical inclusion and scandalous grace of Jesus are even more impressive.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the ACLU of Ohio, which has 85,000 members and supporters across the state. It is our mission to safeguard civil liberties, advance civil rights, and promote fundamental fairness for all Ohioans and for all Americans.

This work is endless, because the price we pay for freedom and liberty is our eternal vigilance. It is up to each generation to safeguard our democracy and make good its promises on behalf of all people, and that is the work that the ACLU is directly engaged in every single day.

We are so grateful for the mission offering that you are receiving today in support of our voting rights work, helping to ensure that the cornerstone of our democracy – voting – is realized by greater numbers of people. And that all attempts to disenfranchise voting are confronted and ultimately ended. Thank you.

And now to the text for today.

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to

the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

<prayer>

"Then Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I realize I'm not the first to think it, or complain about it, but sometimes it's really hard to hear in church.

In the church where I hold my primary membership, in Cleveland, we have that problem. If you sit in the back, anywhere under the large balcony over your head, you might as well forget it. The muffled sounds from the pulpit just don't waft that far back into the sanctuary. It's like wearing earmuffs to worship.

Most of the time, at any church I attend, I parade myself right down front and sit in the second pew, as my good Christian parents demonstrated for us when we were young. That way, I can stay attentive to what's going on. And even then, in

many places, it's hit or miss, because it's hard to hear in a lot of churches.

If my hard-of-hearing dad has said it once, he's said it a thousand times: "I don't know. All they do is stand up there and mumble." He would be the first to second my motion: It's too hard to hear in church.

I haven't done a formal study, but I have visited hundreds and hundreds of churches, and I've more-than-casually observed that the church universal has spent an inordinate amount of money on sound systems that aren't worth a lick.

Oh, we turn them on every week, so that the occasional squealing feedback will make us feel better about our technological capabilities, but for the most part, they're unreliable and, in many places, don't help us that much.

One Sunday, at Pilgrim UCC in Cleveland, the wireless sound system found itself on the same channel frequency with the Russian Orthodox Church directly across the street and I think we were well past the Pastoral Prayer before anyone noticed we had been praying in Pentecost tongues. That's because it's hard to hear in church.

I first realized people had a hard time hearing in church a long time ago.

In my early 20s, for three years, I pastored a circuit of four extremely rural Kentucky churches and the buildings themselves were quite small, but most of the time, we had old vintage air-conditioners running in the windows and multiple oscillating fans sitting around and a couple of crying babies, so hearing in church – even that little church – had its significant challenges.

Too often, the highest form of praise I ever received, early on in my ministry, was when someone would say: “I really enjoyed the service today, pastor. I could hear every word.” Which, when you think of it, is a pretty empty compliment, a little bit like someone saying, “I opened your gift ... ” or “I received your letter ... ” It kind of begs a follow-up.

Now just so I don't offend anyone, I say all of this, as a person with my own hearing disability. I wear hearing aids. But I've noticed that even people who CAN hear well, don't hear that well when it comes to church.

I know that Tim and Emily can attest to this: All preachers have had that experience when someone who just listened to you preach asks you to recap your sermon for someone who wasn't there? ... “in just a couple of sentences, real quick, just tell them what you said.”

And I generally have a hard time doing that, given my own preaching propensity to circling high above my many points before actually landing on one, and so I've taken to just waiting out those requests and allowing the inquisitor to provide for themselves their own Cliff Notes version of what they think they heard me say.

And I don't know if you've ever had the pleasure of that, but it's a humbling experience ... when they relate how deeply moved and forever changed they were, when you said that profound thing you never said.

That's because it's hard to hear in church.

I think it's one of the reasons why we have such a conundrum about what to do with the church announcements. Oh my, what in heaven's name are we going to do with the announcements? That's what I hear.

Here at First Church, I think you do announcements exceedingly well. But a lot of churches really struggle with how to do them right.

Do we put them at the beginning, or at the end, or maybe somewhere in the middle? Maybe don't have them at all and just print them in the bulletin and let people fend for themselves?

Everywhere I have gone in the church that seems to be one of the really big heady issues that church councils are wrestling with: how to do church announcements in a way or at a time so people will actually hear them.

But I've found it doesn't matter how many times you advertise something in the church, there are going to be people who aren't going to hear it.

Even if, in the benediction, you get creative and pray something like, "And now, beloved, as we depart from this holy place remembering that the ACLU of Ohio will have an information table during the fellowship hour immediately following this service" inevitably somebody's going to turn to you after the postlude and say, "Wonder where we can get more information about the ACLU?"

You know why? People can't hear in church.

I have actually learned all this from years of personal experience. I grew up a gay kid in the church ... in Kentucky. And I can't tell how many times someone would pick up a bible and read something like,

"Nothing else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

And I couldn't hear it. Not always. There was a lot of competing bluster around that made that hard to make out.

Oh, sometimes I'd hear things, but usually the wrong things, the incomplete things, the mean things, the narrow-minded things that paled in importance to the amazing grace-filled things that Jesus Christ was literally dying for me to hear.

“Consider the lilies of the field. The birds of the air. How much more will your God in heaven, who loves you, provide for you?”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

“For God so loved the world.”

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus.”

“And you will be God's people, and God will be with you. And God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.”

“Oh, where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

We have trouble hearing that, don't we? Because it's hard to hear in church.

It's hard to hear God's high opinion of you when your own head is so cluttered and noisy with competing opinions.

And if you think it's hard hearing God's love for you, it's even harder to hear just what that love expects, demands, requires, in return.

Because maybe if we can say we never heard it, maybe it just won't challenge and change us so. And ask us to go, and do, and give, and be, and live, in ways that we'd never attempt otherwise.

Maybe this is why, when Jesus went home to Nazareth to preach that day, he offered words that were neither new, nor newly fangled, just familiar words that one would have thought the people had heard thousands of times before.

From the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the acceptable year of our God.”

But he did add his own footnote at the end: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled ... in your hearing. In your hearing. In your hearing.”

But you recall the reaction: they aggressively, even violently, refused to hear. Because just what would a jubilee of justice like that, if heard right now, if fulfilled right now ... what would that mean TO me, and require OF me?

There's a reason why we have to keep coming back to church, week in and week out, sometimes even for extra doses in between, even though not much changes and the lessons we teach are still just the "core curriculum." But it's because this stuff is hard to hear ... but it can be a fulfilling, saving moment for us -- and the world -- if and when and ultimately we ever do.

If we really do abide in faith and hope and love, and the greatest thing is love, and that love is equally for the stranger and the foreigner and immigrant, as we are told time and time again in our scriptures, and I finally hear that, and I digest that, then now how must I live in response to that? It can keep you up at night.

That's why, you, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Columbus, Ohio, you have big and important work to do, because you've got to say it right. You can't say the wrong thing, or the timid thing, or the easy thing, and expect them to hear the New Social Gospel in its place.

You can't be sharing bad news and expect them to hear it as good. Don't be caught mumbling. Say it loud and long and clear so folks can let it finally sink in.

“Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” I will give you *rest*.

A lot of people — too many people — have never heard of a saving grace like that. And you know why, because it's so hard to hear, even in church. Especially in church.

There is an obscure line in Isaiah that says: “Morning by morning, God wakens ... God wakens my ear.”

Maybe that means that, sometimes, our good hearing requires an act of God. God opens the ear.

There are more than a billion hungry people in the world. The average global household income is just about \$7,000, and 19 percent of the world's population lives in a place where people earn much less than that. In the U.S. alone, 13 million children will go to bed hungry tonight. Who wants to hear that?

Who wants to hear that African-American men, who make up just 6% of U.S. population, will make up 50 percent of all men who find themselves in prison today?

Who wants to be disturbed by the reality that tens of thousands of LGBTQ youth will contemplate suicide tonight and that 36 percent of them will actually attempt it before they graduate from high school?

Who wants to hear that 60 percent of all people who are in an Ohio jails right now, this very second, have not been convicted of any crime whatsoever? They just can't afford to post bail to get out of jail while they're awaiting trial. For 30 percent of people sitting in Ohio jails this morning, they are doing so for want of less than \$500. Losing their jobs, housing, and custody of their children in the process.

What wants to hear that?

Who wants to hear that people fleeing war, famine, and persecution in other lands come to our nation seeking asylum – safety and protection – only to be locked up now as criminals and afforded no due process?

Who wants to hear that Ansley Damus, an asylum seeker from Haiti, charged with no crime whatsoever, is today spending his 22nd month in detainment at a private prison in Youngstown, alongside hundreds of others, who have no access to fresh air or sunshine, and have been completely denied visits from clergy or other support systems?

Who wants to hear that?

If you have two coats, give away the one. Go the second mile. Turn the other cheek. Go and do likewise. If you only love those who love you. Forgive 70 times seven. Love your enemies. Bear one another's burdens. God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I was hungry, naked, a stranger, in prison. God is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Wouldn't it be better if we just woke up all the sleeping babies and heard from them instead? Why don't we turn up the air conditioning so that noisy compressor will kick on? And why we're at it, why don't we all move to the very back pews where it will be almost impossible — just impossible — to hear, because sometimes we prefer it that way, when we can't hear in church.

The social gospel, which Washington Gladden and this great church, have championed, begs us as Christians to hear.

The world is waiting for us to hear. The poor, the marginalized, the uninsured, the immigrant, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, the detained, the addicted, the lonely, they're begging for us to hear in church.

In a nation rife with division, scapegoating, racism, mass incarceration, and economic exploitation of the poor, the New

Social Gospel will demand much of us, yes, but nothing will be fulfilled – nothing – until the both demands of the gospel and the cries of the poor and persecuted are heard by us – the ones Christ calls to follow in the Way.

To give more of ourselves to proclaiming justice, in all of its urgent forms, in the name of a generous, caring, compassionate God ... more so than using religion to placate ourselves, isolate ourselves, to the deafening cries all around us.

It's been a few years now since my aunt, my mom's sister, died.

Those two were remarkably close, the best of friends. They had talked on the phone every single day as long as either could remember, relishing in talk of family, discussing a particularly good -- or bad -- round of golf, or the bridge hands they'd been dealt the night before. They particularly liked sharing the most recent good dirty joke they'd heard.

When my aunt went into hospice care, during her final days, I texted my mom and asked how she was doing one day. She replied, and I've not since forgotten her response:

“It will be difficult, I know, but I am strong,” she wrote. “This is what my faith teaches me.”

“It will be difficult, but I am strong.” We are strong.

Her faith taught her that. This Bible taught her that. This church of ours taught her that. You Christians taught her that.

I am so grateful she was able to hear it.

Morning by morning, God opens the ear. What have you heard this morning?

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