

Date: July 8, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 14

**SERMON: Hearing Test**

Text(s): 2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 10:1-11; 16

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When Franklin Roosevelt was president of the United States, like any president, he often had to endure long receiving lines at the White House. His aides frequently heard him complain that no one really paid any attention to what was said in those receiving lines. I'm sure any of us who have had to stand in a receiving line at some public function knows how he felt; nothing ever important is said or heard in a formal receiving line. That's not the purpose; the purpose is to be seen being there.

One day, during one of these receptions, President Roosevelt decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work, Mr. President," "America is proud of you, sir," or "God bless you, sir." It was not till near the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard.

The ambassador at first looked very startled, then confused, but then he leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming, Mr. President."

Probably most of us are not as good at listening as we should be. We all have the ability, largely an unconscious one, to tune in to certain sounds and to tune other sounds out. We have selective hearing. When I'm deeply immersed in a book, my family has learned that if they want me to hear something, they have to stand right in front of me and say, "Are you listening?" Otherwise, it's very possible that I will not hear. This talent for selective hearing earned me the nickname "Mr. Oblivious," though I don't remember what first prompted that label, since I probably wasn't listening. What we're

listening for, to a large extent, determines what we hear.

We see this in both of our lessons this morning. In both, the dynamics of speaking and hearing are central.

In our Old Testament lesson, we have this wonderful story of Elisha the prophet's encounter with an Aramaean general named Naaman who is afflicted with leprosy. As it was until very recently, and still is even today in some areas of the world, leprosy was a social disease as well as a physical one. It carried a powerful social stigma that isolated one from normal social relationships, and often, in the case of Israelite religion, incurred spiritual pollution that resulted in expulsion from the community until the condition was cleared up and religious rituals of purification had been completed.

The Aramaeans, who lived in what is modern-day Syria, were a Semitic people like the Israelites, with a closely related language and culture, though they often fought with one another over territory and water resources despite their ethnic kinship. (Does this sound at all familiar?) At the time of this story, Aram appears to have the upper hand in that rivalry because we're told that it is a slave girl captured from the Israelites during a raid, who tells her master Naaman that there is a prophet in Israel who might be able to help him.

So Naaman, who is sensitive to the politics of this issue, follows accepted protocol and asks permission of his king or tribal chieftain, and his king grants his request and offers to send a letter, along with lavish and costly gifts to the king of Israel, requesting a cure for his commander's skin condition. The king of Israel is not only befuddled by this request; he's terrified, because he quickly, and probably not without reason, concludes that if he can't supply Naaman with a cure, this will be seen as a hostile act by the King of Aram, and will provoke another invasion by the Aramaeans.

But while the king is having conniptions over this request, word leaks out to Elisha the

prophet, and Elisha tells the king not to worry—to send Naaman to him, and he'll show Naaman whose God is the real God. This greatly relieves the king, of course. Now if Elisha fails, it won't look as bad for him, as if he had tried to engineer some cure that didn't work. The matter is off his plate and on Elisha's own head. (A politician is a politician, whether in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD. Or perhaps it's just that human nature is much the same, across the centuries and across cultures—to push responsibility onto somebody else as often and as quickly as we can.)

So Naaman comes to see Elisha, expecting some preferential treatment—perhaps a ceremony of welcome, acknowledging his high status—and some special or esoteric religious rituals, perhaps a sacrifice of some kind to the god of Israel. Instead, Elisha doesn't even bother to go out to meet him. He sends his valet, his personal servant, out to tell Naaman that if he wants to be cured of his skin disease, he has to go dip himself in the waters of the Jordan river seven times.

This is so far from what Naaman was expecting, that he cannot hear it. Elisha has told him, in effect, “Go jump in the river.” This is not what Naaman is prepared to hear. He's offended that the prophet hasn't even come out to greet him personally, in recognition of his status, but has sent a lowly servant to communicate instructions to him. So his ego is suffering and is blocking his hearing. And here we discover something about the psychological, if not the physiological, mechanisms of hearing. Our egos frequently prevent us from hearing a saving word, don't they? If you don't believe me, try offering a word of “constructive criticism” to someone and see what kind of response you get. Better yet, next time someone offers you a word of “constructive criticism,” take note of your own response. Our sense of self-importance, or self-esteem, sometimes really does prevent us from hearing things that could help us improve,

doesn't it? We don't have any trouble at all identifying with Naaman's anger, do we? We understand perfectly why he feels as insulted as he does. We would feel insulted too.

*“I thought that he would surely come out of his house, and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean.” So he turned and went away in a rage.* Not hard for us to identify with Naaman, is it? We know Naaman very well. We see him in our mirrors every morning, don't we?

When we close our ears because the word spoken to us is uncomfortable or unacceptable to our egos, when we selectively tune our ears to hear only what we want to hear or expect to hear, we do not hear the word spoken to us as a word of grace, but as a word of judgment. We go away from the encounter, like Naaman, still bearing the marks of our disease. The root meaning of salvation is wholeness, wholeness and order and balance in all our relationships; anything, then, that blocks our ears to a word that can lead us to that wholeness is the source of our dis-ease. It may be willfulness on our part—we don't want to give up doing or being or thinking the way we do because we're satisfied with ourselves the way we are. Or it may be fear of what others will think of us, fear of losing face socially, or it may be fear of pain, either physical or emotional pain. Whatever it is, if it prevents us from hearing the word spoken to us as a word of healing and grace, we will hear it as a word of condemnation and judgment. Instead of curing our dis-ease, it will tighten the hold of that dis-ease on us. That was what Naaman was in danger of when he allowed his pride to control his reaction and turned away in a rage.

But fortunately, God has more than one voice through which to speak. I find it fascinating that in this story, it is the servants—the little people—who are the courageous risk-

takers, the ones who speak God's word of grace and salvation. It was a captive slave-girl who first suggested to Naaman that perhaps he could find healing and help from a prophet among his enemies. Then it was Elisha's servant who told Naaman what he must do to find healing. And now, it's another servant of Naaman who comes to Naaman and has the daring to say, "You know, Master, maybe it's your ego that's getting in the way here. Maybe you can't hear the healing word of the prophet's God because your own pride and self-importance are stopping up your ears." Oh he doesn't say it in quite that blunt a fashion; he'd like to keep his head attached to his shoulders. He's more subtle. He flatters Naaman by reminding him that he was prepared to be given some difficult or painful procedures to follow, and how pleasant a surprise it is to find out that it's going to be much less painful than expected—at least less painful to his body, though not necessarily to his ego—which is his unspoken implication. So why not humor this prophet and follow his advice? Can't hurt, might help.

It's as if, in a performance over at the Maine State Music Theater, all the good songs were sung by the cast of extras instead of the actors playing the lead roles. The two kings really only provide the decorative stage sets; the prophet Elisha doesn't even make an appearance, but only sings his bit part offstage. Naaman, the powerful general has about the same role as the puffed up buffoon in "The Pirates of Penzance" who is "the very model of a modern Major General" It's the bit players, the extras who carry the freight in this drama. I wonder, in fact, if this isn't where the real weight of meaning in this story lies. Maybe the reason we fail to hear God's saving word to us is that we tend to listen to the wrong voices. We tune our ears to the voices of celebrities, political leaders, the barons of Wall Street, when perhaps we should be listening to the voices of those who are often perceived as bit-players. Maybe we'd get a truer picture of our world and the problems we face if

we listened, not to the public policy-makers or captains of industry, as they used to be called, but the social workers who find themselves overwhelmed with the problems of poverty, or to the nurses and caregivers in our hospitals and nursing homes, or to the school teachers and principals facing increasingly impossible demands in our educational system or to those working with HIV/AIDS sufferers in underfunded NGO's in war-torn or underdeveloped countries or to those persistent and often pesky environmentalists who try to wake us up to our systematic fouling of our own planetary nest. Perhaps it's only in the voices of the servants that we will hear the word of grace, the word that could save us from what ails us.

After all, who would have ever guessed or dreamed that a rag-tag bunch of farmers, artisans, and fisherman, largely illiterate peasants, all of them, would have been the ones to take the message of an itinerant Galilean rabbi, himself a relatively insignificant presence in Roman-occupied Palestine, and literally turn the world upside down? When St. Luke tells us of Jesus sending out seventy disciples on a mission trip to proclaim that God's Kingdom of justice and peace was breaking in and calling people to enter, it's an almost farcical scene. These nobodies are so low-key that they're not even to take extra clothing, food, or baggage with them. They're to travel extremely light and depend only on the hospitality of strangers for their sustenance. And they're not to waste time worrying about whether people are listening to their message or not. That will be obvious; some will and some won't. Those who are ready for their word of grace will hear; those who aren't will not, and that will be their judgment. Jesus tells them, much the same word that Elisha told his servant Gehazi: "*Whoever listens to you, listens to me, and whoever rejects you, rejects me and the one who sent me.*"

The messengers are not responsible for the response of the hearers. The outcome of our

proclamation, we leave to God, just as the outcome of Elisha's proclamation, he left to God. He told Naaman what Naaman needed to hear; it was Naaman's willingness to hear that determined whether that word was a healing word or a word of judgment.

Despite his initial reaction, however, Naaman proves he is ready to hear; he listens to the word of his servant, who is a good servant just because he dares to speak the truth to his master. He decides that he can either go home no different than he came, still with his leprosy and having lost a lot of face in the process, or he can swallow a little pride, which as we all know, is never fatal, and obey Elisha's instructions. He goes as Elisha's servant told him, immerses himself seven times in the Jordan, and comes out clean—in more ways than one. *"Then he came to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel."* Naaman comes out of the river, not only cured, but healed. Not only his skin disease, but his relationship to himself and to God is transformed. His is no longer an ego needing to be honored and exalted, but an ego purified by grace so that it can acknowledge its own creatureliness and God's lordship. And that transformation happened because Naaman opened his ears to hear. *"Faith comes by hearing,"* says St. Paul, *"and hearing by the Word of God."*

It is our great privilege and great responsibility to be both hearers of the Word and the servants who then speak that Word of grace to a world that is deeply alienated, broken, and deaf. We have to tune our spiritual hearing aids to the frequency of God's grace, so that we will hear that Word and experience God's saving power and love in our own lives. But having heard, we are like those servants in the story of Naaman, or the disciples whom Jesus sent out. We have to be the ones to speak that Word to others. Nothing less than the salvation—the peace or *shalom*— of the world depends on it.

Both by testimony and example, we announce the good news that God's saving love and justice are present among us. In faithfulness to that calling is both our own salvation and the world's hope.