

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 8, 2018

“Anybody Listening?”

Mark 6:1-13

His name was George, and he sat in the back row of the sanctuary on the preacher’s right. A permanent scowl was chiseled on his face. His posture announced to all that he was a man not easily pleased. Ushers tiptoed around him. Whenever his name came up in conversation around church hallways, someone would always ask, “Why does a grouch like that keep coming to worship?” No one ever came up with an answer. One thing as certain – George was particularly hard on preachers. “I have heard hundreds of sermons over the years,” he announced to his pastor, “and I haven’t heard many sermons I’ve liked.” Some who sat near the back row wondered if George ever actually heard a sermon. Each week as the preacher began, they would inevitably hear a steady “click, click, click” from George’s pew. If anyone nearby turned to identify the source, they might see a stained-glass sunbeam reflecting from George’s chrome-plated fingernail clippers. “Preacher,” George said at the exit door one day, “I don’t get much out of your sermons.” Before he could restrain himself. The long-suffering minister blurted out, “I know George. But at least you’re getting a weekly manicure.”

Is anybody listening? That’s the question that haunts every preacher. Sometimes we preachers stand up in the pulpit, offer the fruits of careful study and thought and wonder if anything is getting through. Other times we feel like the apostle Peter in the third chapter of Acts, who said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you” (Acts 3:6). On the rare days when the words are tightly crafted, the logic is usually clear, and the metaphors are finely tuned, a preacher may look out on one glazed-over face after another. On the more common days when the preacher’s throat is parched, the hear is pounding, and everybody might have been better off if the preacher had skipped worship and gone out for brunch, someone usually says, “Thank you for your words today; you were speaking to me.” So today, I want to preach a sermon about sermons. I invite you to reflect with me on the curious business of Christian preaching.

Is anybody listening? That’s a good question, because preaching is primarily an oral art. If people cannot speak, they cannot preach. Sermons, by definition, are aural events. Someone speaks to people who come to hear something. The eternal gospel of God is entrusted to the vibration of words across the eardrum. (I read that somewhere). Most of us have known ministers who forget this. They hide behind footnotes and academic margins. Or they use fat empty words to indicate they are smarter than everybody else. Or they glue their eyes to some gilded manuscript on the lofty pulpit, afraid to look at mere mortals down below. These preachers forget that preaching is a particular moment of talking to everyday folks in the context of worship. Woe to the preacher who forgets! Often they need to be told to get off their theological high horse and speak to aunt Fannie in the front row. They need to remember that they speak to real people, present and accounted for, in hope that they will listen.

Of course, let’s admit that not every sermon is worth hearing. Some sermons are so bad that there is no reason to even listen to them. Their content is empty with no word of hope and the good news at the end. Christian preaching is not only speaking to folks in church; it is speaking the gospel. Jesus is the one sermon worth hearing. Every Christian preacher must keep that straight. Otherwise, a mist in the pulpit becomes a fog in the pew. Every Sunday, a piece at a time, it is the preacher’s task to announce that Jesus Christ embodies the good news of God. And yet, is anybody listening? That’s the question in the story we heard this morning from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus himself went to preach to his hometown congregation, and as most who return home will tell you, it can be difficult to get a hearing. Imagine relatives and old neighbors crammed in the third pew, bursting with pride. A teacher from childhood peered through the cataracts and remembered that cute little kid. All your siblings wonder if episodes from family life would become sermon illustrations. In Mark’s story we don’t know if father Joseph or mother Mary came to listen. There was no cake with “WELCOME HOME, JESUS” after his sermon.

In any case, Jesus began to speak and “they took offense at him” Mark 6:3. There he was, among his own people, surrounded by his own family, and they did not listen. Certainly, he gave the same sermon he had preached from chapter one: “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near at hand; repent and believe the good news” Mark 1:15. As sermons go, it was solid, well-polished, and short. Yet, nobody there had ears to hear him.

Then, as it happens in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus told his followers to mimic what he had just done. He sent the disciples out, two-by-two. He said, “I’m going to give you the power to do what I’ve been doing. I want you to heal and confront evil wherever you find it. I give you authority to preach, although when you speak some people won’t give you a hearing” Mark 6:11. Isn’t that striking? As Jesus sent his disciples with power and authority, he reminded them of the sure resistance to the words and deeds of God.

Anybody listening? Maybe not. Many people resist the opportunity to hear the good news. John Duckworth describes this preaching moment in a poem called, “Casey at the Pulpit.”

The smile is gone from Casey's lip; his notes are clenched in hand; he pounds with great intensity his fist upon the stand. And now he starts to make his point, and now he lets it flow, and afterward the people tell him, "Pastor, way to go!" Oh, somewhere in this favored land the Son is shining bright; the organ's playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light; and somewhere folks are learning, and somewhere Christians shout; but there is no growth in Mudville – Pastor Casey's been turned out."

There are many reasons for such a scrambled signal. Some people are too familiar with the message saying, "We've heard all of this before." Or, like the Galilee congregation, they might recognize the messenger all too well, observing, "This isn't anybody special. We know his family." Some people even develop routine expectations for Sunday worship. As someone once said, "Reverend, I didn't come to church to be preached to."

On the other hand, people can equally resist the gospel for reasons of unfamiliarity. They hear a new message and complain, "We never heard that before, is that in the Bible?" Or they create some distance with the messenger by saying, "She has a funny voice." Perhaps they blame an innovative setting. "Well, it was a strange worship service after all."

Curiously, Mark says of Jesus, "He could do no deed of power there" Mark 6:5. Jesus is the Son of God, who came with power to get rid of the house of evil. He came with authority to bring a whole new reign of God. Yet he could not perform miraculous deeds among people who did not listen to him. In the preaching of Jesus, as in all preaching done in his name, we catch a glimpse of the power of God's kingdom. Jesus' work depends, to no small extent, on the capacity of people to receive his words. If they do not or cannot listen to him, Jesus refuses to coerce his hearers, for "he has no power from God to force the people to accept him, and in faithfulness to the rule of God he does not try to dominate them by ordinary means."

So here is the question once again: is anybody listening? Hearing the good news is risky business. The word of God's reign can judge a person's commitments or rearrange someone's emotional furniture. The gospel may raise questions about private and public habits, it commissions people to work in dangerous places, or speak difficult words to the thrones of power. No wonder, then, that someone said, "There are two kinds of sermons that people don't want to hear: bad sermons and good sermons."

Do we really want to embrace the good news of the kingdom? It will require us to come prepared for worship. Those of us who are adults think we know what that means. We jump out of bed as if Sunday were another weekday, drink a quick cup of coffee, splash in the shower, iron some clothes, and rush around. If we are parents, we also steer kids away from the Sunday comics, wash behind dirty ears, tie stiff shoes, brush someone's hair in the face of certain opposition, and beg everybody to get in the car. It's hard work getting ready for worship! But if we wish to claim a home in God's kingdom, we need to truly get ready for worship. What does that mean? It means to enter the sanctuary with a hungry heart, to whisper a prayer for God to speak even if people around us are having lively conversations, to tune into the prelude and let the kingdom music drown out all competing noises. What does it mean to get ready? It means to prepare for God in Christ to speak a word that could rearrange our lives. The risen Lord speaks to us in the thick of our messy circumstances and tangles commitments. And he calls us to pick up a cross and get in step behind him, regardless of the cost. This is risky business for anyone with ears to hear. That's why so many people tune out. But if somebody should listen, and if God should get through, there's no telling what will happen. Anybody listening?