

“Tingling Ears”

I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

Gordon Wiersma 1/15/12

In some ways nowadays, you can really control what you hear, in a very individual way – more so than ever before. I was thinking of that on a couple of road trips with my older daughters this weekend. Just the simple fact that I can be listening to the radio while my daughter can be plugged into her ipod earphones – each of us listening to our own thing. I’ve noticed that on youth trips now too – you can have 7 people in a van, and each one is listening to their own selection of music. Back in the day, it was one radio, and control of the radio dial was the ultimate power to have in the van. It’s different – not better, not worse – different – a lot of choice about what you hear. And a lot of competition going on for your ears too – to get you to listen to things. Media is thrown at us at every turn, and your ears and eyes are the prize – what are you going to listen to? watch? Pay attention to? Not that we always have so much choice – there are plenty of things bombarded at us as well, and sometimes we just want to escape the noise. But, when you can choose, do choose: what do you listen to?

I had a friend tell me once that he believes that people who listen to NPR (National Public Radio) a lot, are generally more anxious than people who don’t; he says they’re more wound up and worried about the world because of what they listen to on NPR; says he prefers to listen to music – good music, of course, in his opinion – and he hears enough about the world in other ways. Any NPR listeners here today? I think there are a few among us...yes?...myself included – usually in the car, but often at home too. So are we a bunch of anxious people, all of us NPRers? Hmm – perhaps you do not agree with my friend’s broad-brush

assessment, but let's not be too defensive about it, or dismissive of it either. The whole idea, I think, is just to realize that what we listen to does have an impact on us – listening to the news; hearing about issues and crises and conflicts affects our inner and outer lives. And although there are so many different ways to go with this and reflect about it, what I've been mainly wondering is something about good news or bad news – something about hope or fear, maybe even about optimism or pessimism – is there some way we are supposed to choose about how much of either or both we take in? Is that an issue for us as people of faith?

I'd like to use the story from I Samuel as an example for that – a case study in listening. It is a story about listening itself, but what I want to do first is to step back and look at how we might listen to the story itself. Because there is an interesting little lectionary dynamic with this passage – if you would see the passage listed in my little lectionary book it has I Samuel 3:1-10, and then verses 11-20 in parentheses – those verses are optional. Well, if you would read just verses 1-10, it is a very nice story: the young boy Samuel is being called by God – it takes him a while to figure it out, but his old mentor Eli helps him, and the story concludes beautifully with God calling and Samuel replies: 'speak, for your servant is listening.' It's lovely. So, shall we stop there? We could – it's good; or, do we venture into the parentheses? Does danger lurk there? Yes – it does. In the parentheses verses, we find out what the word to Samuel is: that Eli and his sons will be punished for their unfaithfulness – and there is nothing they can do about it – no turning back. It is a word, in God's own words, that will make both ears tingle when people hear it – a striking image, I think. Not the kind of thing Samuel wants to tell Eli –

but Eli insists that Samuel must – and Eli listens – ‘it is the Lord – so be it’. Inside the parentheses, the story is not so simple.

In our world of listening choices, how do we choose to listen to scripture? What do we listen to in scripture? In Sunday School, I learned the story of Samuel – the first 10 verses – and that was good; a story of call and listening. But it’s important that we listen to the whole story as well – as faith grows, matures – that we venture into the parentheses, where our ears may tingle from what we hear. Which may not be so bad when it is about Eli & sons – but we may run into some things we hear about ourselves as well, and that is even more tingly. Words of challenge – words of judgment – words that seek us out and claim us, whether or not we want to be (which is something like what the psalmist says in Psalm 139 today). Of course we have to make choices about what we listen to, in life, in Scripture – there is plenty that is not as essential or relevant. But there can be a tendency to listen to just the good stuff, or else certainly to obsess only about the rough stuff too – there can be a tendency in faith not to go into the parentheses (makes you wonder why these verse are given as an option at all). But this Samuel story provides good reasons for us to go there – and I want to look at that with you...

– but first: I have a confession to make...about this sermon...this sermon has really been an idea in search of a text; that is, I had an idea, and just had to figure out a way that these particular lectionary texts would let me talk about it. Now that’s not the way us RCA pastors are trained to do things; it’s supposed to start with text to give you the sermon ideas rather than the other way around. But at least I think that it’s a good idea I had – and relevant too – which should count for something. It’s an idea about reconciliation – which I’ve been thinking about as plans have

been made for this Season of Reconciliation that we enter into today – worship and study and reflection around the theme of reconciliation. A while ago I had been referred by one of our members, Kay Hubbard, to a liturgical resource on Reconciliation – a collection of prayers and scripture and reflections and quotes and liturgies. I received the resource and it looked lovely – and I opened the book, and I was taken aback by the table of contents – the initial headings for sections of the book were: DIVISION; FORGETFULNESS; ALIENATION; CONTRITION; PENANCE – although I was reading, you could say it made my ears tingle. What I was expecting, was something... nicer, perhaps? A reconciliation resource on healing and renewal and peace. But what struck me immediately was how important, necessary, truth-telling it was for those difficult themes to be there in a reconciliation resource. It disturbed me in the good, profound sense of being unsettled – to speak of reconciliation, is to open our ears to difficult things: it is to listen to the realities of division in our world – between individuals and peoples; between races and genders; between classes and cultures; between religions and ideas. Reconciliation demands that we listen to the realities of alienation, conflict and violence – the truth of wars and injustice; the violence of actions and of words; the exploitation of children and the inequity of resources. Reconciliation confronts us with the prejudices within and around us; the racial barriers passed on through history, the social stigmas entrenched within us, and the new hatreds humanity creates. Reconciliation sounded nice to me – but in fact the truth of it pulls us apart before we can be pieced back together; reconciliation challenges us before it comforts us; reconciliation will make our ears tingle when we listen to it fully.

So that was the idea – compelling in some way, I hope – and luckily I do think it’s an idea that finds a sounding in that Samuel story. Because Samuel and Eli help us not simply to observe that there is both pleasant and difficult listening that happens – but the fruit of that listening as well. It’s the completeness of listening that opens us to the fullness of God’s word – this story starts by speaking of the scarcity of hearing God’s word (‘visions were rare’) and concludes with an abundance of God’s word – ‘not one word falling to the ground’, it says, with Samuel – but to get from scarcity to abundance requires both the warm glow of a call to Samuel and the harsh glare of judgment to Eli. And it all happens in the trajectory of something that is life-giving for God’s people – which requires call and challenge together.

I came across one commentator who uses the “makes both ears tingle” in a compelling way: one ear for the call and one for the judgment; one for what is harsh and the other for what is hopeful. I liked that – a tingle for both ears; both realities are true, but only together. Truth is not found in avoiding the parentheses or in dwelling only there. Faith is listening for God, listening to God in judgment and grace together; faith is the commitment to find ways to listen to both – to listen together as community; to listen to others – for calling and challenge.

Now that Reconciliation sourcebook I mentioned wasn't all so foreboding – it also had in it...MERCY; CELEBRATION; RITUAL: PROCLAMATION – there are those good things too! The challenge and the call all belong together. And all are present in the call of Jesus to his disciples: “follow me” – follow Jesus on the path of reconciliation. Jesus calls because things are bad; Jesus calls because God brings life. Our faith is in a God of reconciliation – and our ears tingle with call and judgment; with discouragement and hope; with weariness and renewal; with challenge and change. Listen today for such a word from God, a call to reconciliation that is not rare, but real and present in Jesus Christ: follow me. AMEN.