

Listening & Hearing

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 21, 2017
Text: Acts 16:11-15

I love this time of year when it's warm enough to have the windows open, before it gets so hot that you need to close them again to put the AC on. I especially love the mornings this time of year. The birds literally sing to the sunrise and it is a glorious chorus of incredible beauty. It is a cacophony of discordant chirping, whistling and singing awakening the beauty of the coming new day. I just love to hear it, to listen to the simple joy the bird song proclaims. The thing is they don't know that's what they're doing. At least, I don't think their intent is to create this beautiful symphony of song that I interpret as a joyful morning chorus. No, they're basically just waking up and saying to all their other bird family and friends – "Hey, I'm awake. Are you?"

I confess I do often wonder what else they're saying. Perhaps, "did you realize the Hainsworth's cleaned out the birdbath again? Thank goodness! That thing was disgusting!" Or maybe "The Joneses got another new feeder and it's chock full of those expensive seeds!" And I'm pretty sure they spread the word when that big fluffy feral cat is prowling the neighborhood looking for breakfast. The truth is, though, I don't know what they're really communicating to each other. I hear their glorious bird

song, but try as I might I don't really know what it means. I can listen to it with rapt attention, savoring every lilting note, but I still have no idea what they intend as they sing away. I listen intently and try to imagine what it means to them but in the end all my listening only allows to me to interpret what I hear for myself. I know what their glorious morning song means to me but I can never really know what it means to them.

Listening and hearing. Two concepts obviously connected to each other, and yet distinctly different from one another. Hearing is essentially a biological function as sound waves enter the ear mechanisms resulting in the body's ability to process the significance of those sound waves. Listening, on the other hand, describes how we make meaning out of the sounds we hear as a result of that biological function. Listening and hearing are sort of synonyms for each other and sometimes are even used interchangeably, but anyone who has tried to speak to a distracted child knows that they are NOT the same thing. Especially if that child does not want to hear what you are saying, for example "clean up that mess you just made." They may hear what you say in a biological sense, but until it sinks all the way into their distracted little brains, the mess will remain. Such is the difference between hearing and listening. And it's true for adults as well as children, isn't it? In fact I think adults can be especially adept at selective hearing. We hear what we want to hear and

ignore the rest. Partly that's a survival skill because if we tried to process all the sound waves coming into our brains at any given moment, we'd go crazy! So the question becomes, how do we decide what we will pay attention to within the onslaught of auditory information coming at us each day. How do we decide what's important to hear and what we can ignore? Therein lies the distinction between hearing and listening, something we usually do without thinking. It just sort of happens.

Or does it? That's the core question being explored in this morning's text from Acts. The book of Acts is an extension of the Gospel of Luke, written with the intention of offering a complete history not only of Jesus and his followers while he was with them, but also what happened to the followers of Jesus after his death, resurrection and ascension. Acts has all kinds of wonderful stories about the exploits and adventures of several of the disciples, but it focuses primarily on the exploits of Peter and Paul. This morning's text is one such story about Paul and his encounter with a group of people in Philippi. We know a little about this community and Paul's connection to it as a result of one of the New Testament epistles or letters, Philippians. But this morning's text doesn't appear in that book. It takes place before Paul even wrote that letter. It takes place when he visits Philippi for the first time.

This is a significant story for many reasons, not the least of which is that the main person interacting with Paul is a woman, Lydia. This would have been highly unusual in Paul's time since women were rarely allowed to live their lives on their own terms. As we see over and over again in the biblical texts, a woman was usually nameless, referenced only as being someone's daughter or sister, someone's wife or mother. Lydia may have been all of those things, but we don't know because the text doesn't tell us any of that. All we know for sure is that when she and Paul met, she was a rare independent woman known for her business acumen, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira. For this fact to figure so prominently in the story means that she had to have been a woman of stature. This is confirmed by the description of her as the head of a household. In other words, Lydia was someone who mattered, not because she was a woman but in spite of it and this tells us a lot about Lydia.

Paul and Lydia met on one of Paul's many trips throughout the Mediterranean as he literally spread the word of Jesus to as many people as he could by word of mouth. As he traveled, he would find a way to encounter groups of folks who had an interest in God. In today's story, he and Lydia met because he was looking for a place where people gathered to pray. He left the city and went out by the river to see if any people were there, and they were. Why would he assume the folks he wanted to meet would

be by the river, outside of the city limits? The text is clear that the city he was in was Philippi, and that it was a Roman colony. This meant that Roman law, which regarded the emperor as a god, would be enforced in the city and Roman religion would be the expected norm. But, the Romans were not averse to letting their conquered peoples still worship their own gods, as long as it was done in a low key, un-ostentatious way. This was why the Jewish community in Philippi, who would have been Paul's first stop, probably felt comfortable gathering to worship outside the city, next to the river and Paul knew this. Paul thought that the people who would be interested to hear what he had to say would be outside the city in this particular location. And that's just where they were. Including Lydia.

If we read this text carefully, we quickly see that Lydia was not his primary audience when Paul was speaking. No doubt because she was a woman. As a woman of stature she would have better dressed than the other women there and people would have shown her more respect perhaps. Paul might have noticed her, but then again, maybe not. But she noticed him. More importantly, she heard what he was saying. She was listening intently, eagerly the text says. She was listening so intently, in fact, that she decided right then and there that she wanted to be baptized as a follower of Jesus. And, as the head of a large

household, she also expected everyone in her household to be baptized too. And they were.

Why Lydia? Other people were there, that's clear. But the one named in the text is Lydia. No one else. That tells us she was probably the most important person to be converted to being a follower of Jesus that day because if a man had done the same thing, the biblical writers would have written down his name and Lydia most likely would have remained nameless. So what's up with Lydia? Why her? And why was she listening so closely? The text is very clear on that point. "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul." The Lord *opened her heart to listen eagerly!* God was the reason Lydia heard what Paul was saying and recognized its importance in her life. God made the connection between Lydia possible and fruitful. It wasn't Paul's speaking ability any more than it was Lydia's ability to hear what he said. The whole thing happened – Lydia's conversion and baptism along with her entire household – because God made it happen! God opened her heart and it is that which made it possible for her to hear fully and completely, with thoughtful attention as Webster's would say, what Paul was saying about Jesus and this new way of loving and serving God. God was in the middle of this encounter between Lydia and Paul. God made it happen. And guess what? God can and does do the very same thing for us if we are willing to let it happen.

But, how do we do that? What do we need to do so that God will open our hearts to listen eagerly just as God did for Lydia? What do we need to do to be transformed when we hear the good news of Jesus here on Sunday morning or anywhere we encounter it? How do we open ourselves to God so that God can open our hearts to the endless possibilities of faith the same way God opened Lydia's? Well, the most important thing to realize is that these kinds of interactions between God and people happen usually because the person has been seeking God, even if it was without fully knowing it. Lydia met Paul because she was there where the people gathered to pray next to that river. She was looking for something. She went looking for God. She went looking for deeper meaning in her life. She went hoping and praying for something. And then she met Paul and everything changed. God answered her prayers and opened her heart so that she *could* listen eagerly to all he was saying. God provided the final piece of the puzzle Lydia needed to find what she was looking for – deeper meaning in her life through a deeper, more intentional relationship with God.

So what of us? Presumably you are here this morning because on some level you are seeking a deeper relationship with God. Or perhaps you just want to hold on to the relationship you already have with God. Or, maybe you're not really sure why you're here this morning but you just knew you wanted and

needed to be here. Dear friends, whatever your reason for being here this morning, God is what brought you here. God is who opens your heart to listen in way that is far deeper than just hearing what it said. God is what makes all the difference every time you pray, whether it's here or somewhere else. God is always the one who opens your heart to new possibilities, to healing from aching hurts, to restore hope and believe in the power of forgiveness. That's all God. BUT, you have to take that first step toward God. You have to listen for God speaking in your life and in the busy, noisy, frenetic world in which we live that takes real effort and intent. You have to listen through the endless noise bombarding you at every turn. You have to turn off the television and take off the ear buds now and then if you want to hear God. You have to stop talking at God and start listening for God. You have to listen eagerly, as Lydia did, confident that if you do, God will have something to say that you need to hear.

Now, dear friends, make no mistake, this eager listening is not easy. It takes effort and intentionality. But all you have to do is try. Try reaching for God. Try listening for God. And God will always, always, always reach back to you. God always has time for you. God is always interested in you, God's beloved Creation precious in his sight. Jesus says that every bird that sings in the morning is precious to God so surely you can trust that you are too. How wonderfully glorious is that? Amen.