

Itchy Ears and Honey Lips
Jeremiah 31.27-34, Psalm 119.97-104, II Timothy 3.14-4.5
October 16, 2016
Pentecost +22C
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My mind is restless after another week of reading too many articles about our world, our nation, and the upcoming presidential election. I feel my heart start racing when I scroll past another story, another statistic, a new twist or turn. I'm not sure I can watch Wednesday night's debate as I still haven't scrubbed last Sunday night's out of my brain. I need to tell you this because I am holding all of that in one hand today and found I could not leave it outside of my study of scripture this week. I encourage you to consider with me the invitation within the day's lections.

We have three texts before us in worship this morning with a thread that connects them, and I have studied these passages of scripture side-by-side wondering what the word for us today might be—Jeremiah 31, Psalm 119, II Timothy 3 and 4.

Words to an exiled people promising that God's law will be written on their hearts even though it is the people's tendency to forget their God again and again. Promise of a new start, a new beginning, a new covenant means these people will belong to God no matter where they live, and they are bound to God's ways not through blessed borders and territory marked as sacred but through the center of their very beings. The promise God makes is that God's truth is within them. The challenge will be in the remembering.

Eight verses of a beautiful psalm dedicated to the love of the law, the love of knowing God's ways, the love of being intimately linked to God's teachings. To walk this closely and meditate this faithfully brings God's words so fully to life that the student of scripture can taste them. They are "sweeter than honey to my mouth," the psalmist writes. The challenge will be in living out that sweetness.

And a letter from mentor to mentee offering both warning and encouragement. The world around you will sometimes make you want to quit and people will break your heart when they choose selfishness, lies, slander, and recklessness. Don't quit. Don't be swayed by that darkness. Don't listen to the world's bad advice like those with "itching ears" do. Remember what you have been taught since you were a small child and "be persistent" to "convince, rebuke, and encourage" in your teaching. Trust and know that you have been "equipped for every good work" and the ways of God are within

you even when those around you are turning away from truth. The challenge will be in choosing good in the face of evil.

What do you hear in these texts? What stands out to you? For me, these are words of hope, promise, and direction in a frightening and complicated time. As a faith leader who is charged with the task of speaking truth, grace, and peace into life's realities, I have lately found myself at a loss when considering the climate around us that is the opposite of truth and grace and peace. Leave it to the pundits and the editorialists and to Saturday Night Live, I've thought to myself. But today I am concerned about what is happening to our humanity, and the spiritual health of us as a people needs to be talked about in here.

This election has gone off the rails. I think we know that, and I know we're talking about it everywhere but in this room. So let's say in our safe and sacred space of worship: this election has gone off the rails. There is no healthy debate and reasonable disagreement about governance and policy. We are now witnessing and participating in something that makes no sense and needs to be interpreted in here, in this space, by us as a people. It happened a while back; I don't know that I can mark the point at which we all realized that we were in new territory. Each week's news cycle has grown more and more preposterous. It seems we as a culture, maybe not you individually, but we as a nation have rolled our eyes or read headlines aloud to one another with mixed parts incredulity, horror, amusement and bemusement. But none of it is funny anymore. And we are 23 days away from a presidential election with large factions of our country completely unable to hear one another and some of them ready to evict large swaths of the nation. The climate has moved beyond sarcasm and private judgement to name calling to actual threats of violence, some of which appear to have credibility behind hateful words.

After last week's debate, Tim Lauve-Moon and I were overwhelmed and discouraged talking about the vitriol between the candidates and the anxiety the scene produced. In our Monday staff meeting, we decided we needed to host a kindness corner. And so we set up our table and chairs on Tuesday morning at the corner of St. Charles and Broadway, with a coffee cart and boxes of KIND bars to offer for free to passersby along with stickers that read "Kindness Changes Everything." Because a general sense of kindness is what we are lacking. Human kindness. This isn't partisan. This isn't even uniquely Christian. We are talking about basic generosity and affection for neighbors and strangers. The ability to be polite even when you disagree with someone or do not understand the "otherness" of someone.

Take a beat to be shocked by that, please. This is where we are as a society right now—we need to remind one another of the shared value of kindness. And guess what? Some of the people who stopped by for coffee and a KIND bar really challenged my kindness. Either the angry-toned political t-shirt one man was wearing, or the man who stayed too long and never quite seemed to understand what we were doing, or the woman who seemed horrified by my lady-pastor-ness and longed for Tim and me to find our home in the Catholic church. But then there was the woman who wanted to hug us both, and the folks who smiled and high-fived and appreciated that we weren't selling church and weren't even selling coffee. We truly wanted only to make a brighter Tuesday with a momentary exchange of shared humanity between strangers.

Maybe you've wondered why I haven't come at this more directly until now or maybe you're terrified when you perceive I'm crossing a line into politics and all of this makes you uncomfortable. So first let's revisit what I have said in sermons previously this year: politics is not a bad word. In fact, "Politics is a good word..originating from the Latin and Greek roots of the words: *polis* means *city* and *politicos* means *citizen*. In talking about things political, we are talking about the citizens, how citizens live together, how we organize our shared life together because we're all in this together. We are acknowledging that there is a shared good between us that we all desire."¹ It is essential that we talk about our common good, human thriving, shared good between us, how we live together. We talk about these things not because they are easy but because we love each other, and we love our neighbors.²

Here's the thing: we aren't doing this well in this presidential election cycle. We aren't honoring true politics right now. Our national discourse, if you can really even call it that, is not about the common good and working for the shared needs of citizens living together. We are confounded. We are defriending and hiding each other on facebook. We are glued to the newspaper or to our phones as we refresh social media feeds to see what new disaster has been tweeted. And some citizens are prepared to literally fight for what they fear is being taken from them.

And far too much of the cruel and bitter tone has come from people who profess to follow the Way of Christ Jesus, and I am mortified that there is such a disconnect in the church that prominent evangelical leaders can hold the same sacred texts that I hold and then endorse a candidate for President of the United States with hate and rage foaming on their lips. "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false

¹ <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-54-politics-and-guns-part-1-politics-is-a-good-word/>

² http://scabc.org/Sermons/20March16_WelcomingParade.pdf

way," the psalmist declares. I am increasingly convinced we don't follow the same Jesus. We don't read and hear the same invitation of scripture. The Church is as divided as the nation.

And yet, across the country today and again on November 6 in places of worship, thousands of pastors have signed on with Rev. Drs. William J. Barber, James Forbes, Traci Blackmon and the Moral Revival movement to use their voices and pulpits, agreeing: We cannot remain silent. Our country is in need of a moral revolution of values to champion the sacred values of love, justice, and mercy in the public square. Over 3000 pastors and faith leaders have signed onto a "Higher Ground Moral Declaration, proclaiming a broad consensus that, while we may be both conservative and liberal, while we are Democrat, Republican, and Independent, we can agree that we must work together to advance public policies that uplift our deepest moral values."³

Even within the Church, there are all kinds of voices and teachers actively challenging and inviting you to participate in a particular way of being in this world. Which voices are the right voices? Which teachings are the best teachings? Which invitations are the ones that bring you to fullness of life as a human being created in the image of God? Which paths invite us to consider the best for the least of these in our world? Which paths invite us to protect ourselves and our self-interests? These are questions we must ask ourselves. Professor of New Testament Matt Skinner challenges us to pay attention in II Timothy 4.3 to the "interesting comment about people with 'itching ears,' who 'accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.' It's an accusation any group might make against those who don't listen 'properly,' and at its root we find a common human tendency, that of surrounding ourselves with teachers and voices who say only the things we want to hear."⁴

We need to be careful in how we define listening properly and discerning teachers who aren't just suiting our desires. For our purposes here in this space—followers of Christ who are committed to a particular Way, a Way that draws us further into the kingdom of heaven and a Way that draws the image of God out in us—the test should be about fruit. What fruit is being produced in us and in the world around us? What is manifesting within us and then in the world around us? Are we becoming more angry? More anxious? More hostile? Less trusting? More afraid? There's a pretty good chance that those are not the ways of God being written on our hearts. Are we less

³ <http://www.moralrevival.org>

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1836

welcoming? Less trusting? More hostile? Angrier? These are not the words of God, sweeter than honey to the mouth.

Friends, we know what is right and true. We know that our faith doesn't live in isolation within the space in this one hour. We enter this time here to remember who we are. We are God's people. The teachings that shape our lives make us more generous. More trusting. More hopeful. More loving. More compassionate. When we are stepping into truth, we are braver, kinder, stronger, more fully alive and more fully ourselves. When we are on the Way of Christ Jesus, we are extending this same grace and peace to everyone we meet. We believe with the fullness of our beings that God is building and planting through us, and the scripture we hold in our hands reminds us this is true.

Remember the questions I ask when I baptize dear ones here:

- 1) Do you commit yourself to the Way of Jesus?
- 2) Do you welcome the fruit of the Spirit into your days? Peace, love, joy, kindness, goodness, patience, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control?
- 3) Do you commit yourself to honoring the image of God marked within you and within all those whom you meet?

This is our basic commitment, and if it falls away as soon as we hit the sidewalk to reach for our car keys to go home, then it isn't really written on our hearts. This faith is no good to us if it isn't shaping the ways we live and love in this world. This faith is not worth teaching to our children if we don't expect them to actually grow up into it and carry out what they have learned and believed. We keep showing up here because we believe—in all things—the Way of Christ Jesus matters.

We come together here for just a tiny portion of our week to meditate on God's word that we might know the true way from the false way. We are renewed and equipped for every good work and are called to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. This remembrance and renewal is to be carried into the ordinary-out-there of life from the ways we speak to ourselves, to our families, to strangers, to refugees, to the easy to love and the hard to love, and even in the ways we agree and disagree in politics. We are to reject any other false way. Yes, we will fall short, we'll miss the mark, we'll get it all wrong. But we are committing ourselves anew each week to keep chasing after the Ways of God because we believe the words that we taste here in this time together are true.

My brothers and sisters, may you live this out. May you feel God's words within you. May you remember who you are. May you taste truth on your lips. Amen. Amen. Amen.