

Welcome to our Service Today

In the midst of experiencing what I like to call “cabin fever” I am reminded of the words of Mark Twain:

“Out of all the things I have lost, I miss my mind the most.”

But in all seriousness mental health is not a laughing matter. There are times when constructing puzzles and playing scabble can only do so much to alleviate those deep-down emotions that can come bubbling to the surface during these times of isolation. We have witnessed the increase in anxiety among all age groups, from our children to those who reside in our long term care homes.

So I hope that you are continuing to do whatever is necessary to overcome those feelings which can take a hold of us during these winter months and which of course have been more prevalent during this lockdown. We know that there is still a deep stigma around mental health and it is not always easy to reach out either for ourself or to help others. But I think we can find inspiration in the words one of my favourite theologians Fred Rodgers:

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.”

So today we talk but also listen to ourselves, to others, and to God’s Word
Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

O Still Speaking God,
throughout history and continuing today in this wide world,
you have gathered people around your Word to comfort, to instruct and to inspire.

We give thanks for all who have heard Your Word and shaped diverse and faithful communities to follow in your Way.

Continue to speak your vision to us, that we may become transformed by the renewing of your Word in our hearts.

Enable us to grow in love and understanding for each other .

Create in us, O God, open hearts and minds;

We desire to be your children so inform and inspire us to seek your kingdom on earth in our time. This we pray in your Holy name. Amen

Opening Song

Let us now hear “What the voice of Jesus Says” in a classic hymn written in 1846 and performed now by Wendy Ritchie from the album Celtic Source.

<https://youtu.be/t3DgIPIZthU>

Scripture Ephesians 4:1-16 (NIV)

Unity and Maturity in the Body of Christ

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. **2** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3** Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. **8** This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. **16** From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Meditation

Listening for the Voice of God In Sermons

Listening: it doesn't come naturally to many of us. Talkative people like to talk. Shy people wish they could talk. Few of us prefer to just listen. More of us, especially me, should be doing just that, as my kids used to say "You're not listening to me".

But, of course, you *are* listening just now. I'm speaking, and you're listening. At least, I think you are. That's what's supposed to be happening, anyway, as I understand it: in this part of the service, the minister, or pastor, or "preacher" *preaches* a sermon, while others listen.

Did you ever stop to think how strange that really is? Why would we do that? What is supposed to happen? Why do all churches in search of a new minister always say they want someone who is a "good preacher"?

And what is a "sermon" anyway, and why is it always a part of our worship?

Let's face it: people don't normally gather together to just listen to someone making speeches. Other than on Sunday mornings in churches, when does that sort of thing ever happen? Well I guess Out of necessity, at political rallies, or once in a while, on special

occasions, with famous people. Like, for example, in 2019 when Michele Obama packed the Scotia Bank center in Toronto.

But at other times, when more ordinary people are speaking, who goes to hear them? Not many. Most people are not that excited about speeches. But here we are just like last Sunday giving or listening to a speech. Don't you find that strange?

So why do we do it? We do it because when God speaks to his people, he does it through the spoken words of particular men and women who are his servants. That's what God has always done. So if we would hear the voice of God today, that is one of the ways we can do it.

Of course, we know that a sermon is not actually God speaking. Sermons are just ordinary words spoken by ordinary people, with (usually) as many problems within those sermons as within the people who present them.

Sermons can be interesting or boring. They can be clear or confusing. They can be helpful or unhelpful. They can reflect God's truth, or they can lead people away from God's truth. Sermons are only words, after all: and anything that's true of words — helpful or otherwise — is true of sermons as well.

So why do we bother? Because God has chosen to use sermons — what the Bible calls “the foolishness of preaching” — to bring people to himself. God uses human words, spoken by ordinary

people, to allow the world to come to know him. So we do our best — you and I together — to allow that process to happen.

However, preaching helpful sermons is much harder than most listeners suppose. And it's not for the reasons you might think.

For example, I hear people say, “You know, I've never been able to stand up in front of others and say anything. I just couldn't do it.” But that's not the biggest problem.

Other people say, “How can you possibly find something to talk about for twenty minutes every single week?” That's not the biggest problem, either.

Here is a problem much bigger than either of those: finding words that can be helpful to a vast diversity of different people. Think about it: an online service such as this, we can now have listeners who range in age from their early teens to the late ninties.

The younger listeners have likely only heard a few dozen sermons in their lifetimes. The oldest listeners have heard thousands.

The younger people only know about the Christian faith from what they've learned in say Sunday School or at church camp. The older people know a whole lot more — or they should.

Then there are at least a few persons of various ages who listen in, that maybe have no church background at all.

What newcomers need to hear is teaching on the very basics of the Christian faith. What the teenagers need to hear is teaching one level beyond what they learned in Sunday School. What those who have been in the church for years need to hear is advanced teaching that will allow them to grow even further in Christian maturity. But one sermon has to speak to them all.

If the illustrations link to the age of the older members, the youth won't understand them. If the illustrations link to current youth culture, the older people won't understand them.

If the preacher repeats some basic theme every few months, like what it means to be a Christian — doing it for the sake of new people coming in — long-time members may find that repetitious. If the preacher fails to do that, new people may never hear the basics they need to hear about making an initial Christian commitment.

If the level of language — the words used — suits the university graduates in the crowd, the people with no post secondary education may feel like they are being talked down to. If the language is geared, let's say, to today's youth culture I too may need to use an online dictionary to understand it.

Remember, everyone is listening to the same sermon.

If the theme of the sermon is a bit controversial, some listeners may be pleased while others may be alienated. If the theme is

never controversial, no important issues of the day will ever be addressed — and all sermons will be as exciting as a Sunday dinner of baked tofu.

If a sermon encourages a certain form of conduct, persons who behave otherwise may say, “That wasn’t fair. He was preaching that sermon at me!” (Almost certainly, he wasn’t.) Other persons may say, “Great sermon, pastor! There are a few people in this church who I sure hope were listening this morning!” Possibly — secretly — the pastor hoped that the people who said that to him were listening, too — but, clearly, they weren’t.

If the preacher raises his voice occasionally, some listeners may find him (or her) too emotional. If the preacher always speaks softly, the odd person may fall asleep.

If the preacher speaks without notes, some listeners may find that the sermon rambles. If the preacher speaks with a prepared text, some may feel that there’s not enough freedom for the leading of the Spirit.

Remember, everyone is listening to the same sermon.

Clearly, it isn’t possible to please everyone. Clearly, it just isn’t possible.

But — wait. Maybe we’re not supposed to please everyone. Maybe, even, we’re not supposed to please anyone — except God

alone. Maybe sermons are only supposed to please *God* — because *God* is the one who is trying to speak, trying to be heard, through what is being preached.

Maybe all that matters is whether the voice of *God* can be heard through it all. And maybe that happens *only when we are really listening*.

Maybe that happens only when we are really listening.

Now, of course, listening to the words of a sermon is not the same as listening to the words of *God*. No preacher with even the tiniest bit of common sense has ever claimed that his or her words, directly, were the exact words of *God*. That's not how it happens. It just doesn't work that way.

But what can happen — in spite of all of the different needs, and different life-experiences, and different preferences, and different levels of Christian maturity — what can happen is that *God's* voice can speak to us *through* the words of a sermon. Through what I say — if I happen to be the preacher — *God* can speak to you. If you are listening for the voice of *God*, he can speak to you. And you can respond.

Notice what Paul says in our Scripture lesson about the leadership *God* has given to his church: *It was he [that is, God, Paul writes] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to*

prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ [Ephesians 4:11-13]. Notice: God called leaders in the church to prepare his people for works of service, and to help them grow to Christian maturity. And what do those people mainly do: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers? What do they mainly do? They speak: prophets prophesy, evangelists preach evangelistic sermons, pastors speak words of support and caring, and teachers teach. The Christian community grows through spoken words.

And sermons preached on Sundays are one part of that process.

Not that God doesn't speak also in ways other than sermons. Of course he does. We'll look at some of those other ways on other Sundays. But sermons are a basic building-block in God's communication strategy. And they've always been.

I'm not sure I fully understand God's reasons for choosing to use sermons, any more than I fully understand why he chooses fallible and imperfect individuals like you and me to carry out the work of his church. I'm not sure I really understand that. But that is what God has done, and if we wish to hear God speaking to us today, through sermons is one way it can happen.

Does God speak to you through sermons? Has it happened for you, that you know of, even once? If so, even once: what was the sermon about? Do you remember? Quite possibly you don't remember. What you *do* remember is that God spoke to you in those moments, and in some way large or small, changed your life.

What matters in the end is not the words of the sermon. What matters is that through the sermon God was speaking to you, and you were listening.

Our part is just to listen.

When I was maybe twelve years old, an evangelist held a crusade at Opeongo High School and I remember my mom taking me. And there I listened to a sermon that truly spoke my heart.

I haven't the slightest idea what the sermon was about, but at the end, when the preacher gave the invitation, I knew that I should go forward and give my life to Christ. The voice of God was speaking to my heart. I knew absolutely that it was what I needed to do.

But I didn't do it. I fought with myself, I didn't go. I did give my life to Christ under quite different circumstances quite a few years later, but, looking back, I often wonder: if I had obeyed the voice of God that night, how would my life have been different? What wrong choices in my early teens and young adulthood might have been avoided if I had earlier listened to the voice of God?

I'll never know, of course. But I do know who was speaking to me that night, through that evangelist's sermon: the same God who has spoken to me countless times since, through the sermons of countless other preachers, and also through my own. God is speaking, if we are listening.

The sermon itself may be far from perfect. It may not seem to link up at all to our age, or experience, or personal preferences. Nothing may seem to connect well at all. But if we are listening, God will speak to us. If we are listening, God will speak.

Listening makes all the difference. Thanks be to God.

Pastoral Prayer

God of Infinite Wisdom, in the Name of Jesus, I thank You that You desire to speak to me every day—guiding me in spirit and in truth - to hear Your Word and enjoy your promise of an abundant life. I thank You that You have called me Your friend and that I may come boldly to the throne of grace to find help whenever I have a need in my life, or whenever mental anguish threatens to overtake me.

Lord, Your Word says that when we draw near to You, You will draw near to us. So, I draw near to You today. I seek Your face, Your truth and Your word for my life. I want to know You more, hear You more and feel You more.

Your Word says Your sheep know Your voice and we will not follow the voice of a stranger. Help me to know Your voice and not be deceived by others. Help me to guard my heart from the influences of this world and those people around me who aim to deceive.

As I seek to hear You today for comfort, instruction, and guidance, help me to confirm Your voice through Your Word so that I may view all thoughts and decisions through the lens of righteousness. You said if I ask for wisdom, You will give it to me abundantly, so I am asking for wisdom in the Name of Jesus to hear You, clearly and consistently, today and every day.

Help me to feel confident in knowing that I hear Your voice.

I praise You and thank You for it, in Jesus' Name. who taught us to pray saying... Our Father who

Closing Hymn

I leave you now with the hymn that never fails to touch me no matter how I am feeling. "How Great Thou Art" Performed by the Anthem Lights. Until we meet again.

<https://youtu.be/Oj6q7nvPuHY>