

“Wrestling with: Hearing to Understand”
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
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Introduction to Gospel reading: John 3:1-17

**In this moment of listening for wisdom
may our hearts and minds hear
how God longs to surprise us...
and open us to life
so that we may be sources of
peace-building in this world
as ones empowered by that
mystical, mysterious, yet very real, power of love....**

**Our gospel story this morning
is from the gospel of John
and contains a key phrase
that has become central in some churches
.....and that is the idea
of the need to be born again....
born again for these churches - in such a way
that you can name the exact moment in your life
when that happened for you....
.....Some here this morning can do that
....they have a clear memory of a moment
when their heart got it.....
and they plugged into a power beyond themselves**

that they feel deep within themselves....

**...for others their faith is more like a
gentle unfolding and deepening
that is happening over time.**

**Personally I like the phrase born anew rather than born again
- both are fairly accurate renderings of the original language.**

**For me being born anew acknowledges
that it is not something that just happens once in our lives
but rather we are born anew again and again and again in our lives.**

**The gospel of John,
in contrast to the other three gospel stories,
is the most metaphorical gospel.
It is in John that we hear Jesus named as
.....the bread of life,
.....the light of the world with an invitation to come and follow
....and where we hear Jesus say
I am the vine and you are the branches
a wonderful metaphor to imagine
and understand
how we are nourished and upheld
as we reach out to the world.**

**In our story today
we hear Jesus try to help Nicodemus
grasp a concept that is a metaphor**

**but Nicodemus keeps missing the point,
wanting to make what Jesus is saying
literal rather than understanding
that Jesus is speaking metaphorically of an experience.**

**It's like the word God...
the experience of God cannot be contained by mere words
- so we use metaphors to try to capture
the magnitude of an experience
that cannot be contained by words.**

**In the rabbinic tradition
the rabbis teach through stories with a certainty that if someone
doesn't understand what you are teaching them about faith
....you keep on telling them stories and using metaphors
until they begin to experience what you are talking about
.....and then they will know.**

**I had a delightful moment this week
after the service to celebrate Greg Allen's life.
One of the kids that did the enquiry group with me
a number of years ago
came up to me after the service
to give me one of those big hugs that I love so much
when any of those kids come home....
and she said to me
"I've been hearing you talk about abundant life**

**and eternal love for years
..... today I got it.”
and my heart warmed....**

**Let's listen in on the conversation
between Jesus and Nicodemus
knowing, that though Nicodemus doesn't get it,
he remains a loyal friend....
for it is Nicodemus, with all his power as a Pharisee
– a religious leader of his day
who arranges for Jesus' body to be buried,
a ritual rarely given to those
crucified by the state.....
a request that put this Pharisee
in a risky position amongst his peers
by wanting to honour a man
they had arranged to have crucified....**

Gospel reading: John 3:1-17

SERMON

Wrestling With: Hearing to Understand

A few years ago British Rail had a real fall-off in business.

**Looking for marketing answers,
they went searching for a new ad agency
- one that could deliver an ad campaign
that would bring their customers back.**

**When the British Rail executives went to the offices
of a prominent London ad agency to discuss their needs,
they were met by a very rude receptionist,
who insisted they wait.**

**Finally, an unkempt person led them to a conference room
- a dirty, scuffy room cluttered with plates of stale food.**

The executives were again left to wait.

**A few agency people drifted in and out of the room,
basically ignoring the executives who grew impatient by the minute.**

**When the execs tried to ask what was going on,
the agency people brushed them off and went about their work.**

Eventually, the execs had enough.

**As they angrily started to get up,
completely disgusted with the way they'd been treated,
one of the agency people finally showed up.**

**“Gentlemen,” he said,
“your treatment here at our Agency is not typical
of how we treat our clients
- in fact, we’ve gone out of our way to stage this meeting for you.
We’ve behaved this way to point out to you
what it’s like to be a customer of British Rail.
Your real problem at British Rail
isn’t your advertising, it’s your people.
We suggest you let us address your employee attitude problem
before we attempt to change your advertising.”**

**The British Rail executives were shocked
- but the agency got the account!**

**The agency had the remarkable conviction
to point out the problem because it knew
exactly what needed to be changed.**

~

**The ad agency was quite brilliant.
They knew that to just put their concerns into words
would not penetrate the thinking of the executives
- they pummeled the walls of resistance
by creating an experience that broke down that resistance.**

**As a Pharisee, Nicodemus had a certain way to look at the world.
Jesus tried to share something at a deeper level with him
but Nicodemus couldn't get it
– he couldn't get his head around what Jesus was saying at all.**

**When we don't get something or when something is strange to us,
too often we try to lay the blame the person who has spoken
laying a heap of our prejudices on them.
Not understanding and trying to blame someone for that
builds walls between us
that create all kinds of problems of misunderstanding.**

**When we don't understand....
what a difference it would make if we could just be curious
about what another is trying to communicate with us...
then the dialogue will remain open
....without judgment
but rather with a keen spark of interest in one another.**

**I watch people shut down communication with each other all the time
and it makes me weep to see it...
whether it is between a child and parent,
two partners in life,
or between nation with nation....**

Hearing to Understand.....

**Did you know that only 7% of our communication
happens through words?
The other 93% of our communication
happens through tone, body language, goal behind our words, intentions....**

**.....and then all those are taken into another person
and our communication is put through a series of filters
that assess what is being presented
so *that* person's past experiences and existing prejudices
add in either an openness to what it being shared
or walls of resistance and resentment....**

**The other day I sent an email to someone
and I started it by saying Hey – H-e-y
and then asked if they were going to have time
to do the thing they said they'd do.
Right after I pressed Send
I realized that they word 'Hey'
could have a whole lot of negative charge on it for that person.**

**In my mind I was saying 'Hey' like we use it in our family
....which is a gentle hay-ah tone
that *we* all know means
'I want to connect on a deep level
not about anything in particular
but just want to be together for a bit'.**

In this other person's life 'Hey' might have been said to him

**with lots of negative accusatory judgmental energy on it from his Dad
...and I had just put it in front of what may now appear as a demand rather than
the gentle loving nudge I had intended it to be ...
so I sent a little prayer to follow it
with the hope that if it triggered something negative in him
that he would talk to me about it
rather than let it fester as poisonous resentment.**

Hearing to Understand

**Another example of the way we communicate by more than words
is in the reality that the same words can be used at different times
and trigger very different responses within us.**

A simple example....

**When my kids were young
they might come to me one day and say
“Mom can I have a cookie?”
and I respond with “How about an apple?”
My sense in that moment is that my daughter is hungry.**

**But another day the same words can be used
and I respond very differently inside....**

**“Mom can I have a cookie?”
and this time I am irritated.**

The goal feels different.

It's not really about being hungry.

It's my child trying to get attention

in a moment when they can't think of any other way to get attention.

Once I realize that the goal is attention and not hunger

**I can choose how to respond in a way that is caring
rather than answering with an abrupt – ‘you just had breakfast’**

(which might have been my first response)

**I can instead choose to bend down and chat for a moment
even in the midst of something going on around us.**

Hearing to Understand can make such a difference in this world.

**There is a story in the Reader's Digest this Christmas
about two men meeting....**

that begins

**“Sixty two years after he bombed a city in Japan
at the very end of the Second World War,
a pilot meets one of those
who lived through the horror on the ground.”**

The two of them met on line at first and then met face to face.

**Together they reconstructed what happened on that day
from the perspective of an 11 year old on the ground
and one whose perspective was from above
... a day that had absorbed both of their attention
for much of their lives....**

When it was time to part
the old pilot Lock said to his new friend...
“I’m so glad no one in your family was killed.
But lots of people were,
and I have to take some responsibility for that.”
“It wasn’t your fault,” Arai began to interrupt.
“I was up there in that plane,” Lock insisted.
“I feel bad for what happened on the ground,
especially to people who were innocent.”
Lock brushed away tears as he reached out
to shake Arai’s hand for a final time.
“Wouldn’t it be nice if the whole world
felt towards each other
like you and I feel,” he said.
“There wouldn’t be any wars.”

Hearing To Understand

Tradition

During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe,
when the Shema prayer was said,
half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting.
The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down,
and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up.
The rabbi, learned as he was in the Law and commentaries,
didn't know what to do.

His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound 98 year old man who was one of the original founders of their temple.

The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual temple tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation.

The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?"

"No, that is not the tradition," said the old man.

"Then the tradition is to sit during Shema!"

"No," said the elder. "That is not the tradition."

"But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand."

"That," shouted the old man, "is the tradition!"

Traditions

**are sometimes the source of misunderstanding
.....actions rooted in a tradition we don't know or understand
but the good news is - we can choose to let go of such traditions
.....for the sake of being community
.....for the sake of being together
connected by the energy from above
.....born not of the body but of the spirit.....
....what difference does it make if some stand and some sit
....some wear certain clothes and others wear different ones?
can we be curious enough to let go of our walls of preformed judgments
so that we can hear to understand?**

**That's the question that Jesus was constantly asking
....demanding that people understand
that God's love is deeper than any external definitions of people
and that we need to be born anew to that understanding in our lives....**

**There was a press release from
the United Church of Canada this week
entitled:**

**Remembering the Children
An Aboriginal and Church Leaders' tour
to prepare for Truth and Reconciliation**

**It begins: Canada will soon mark a pivotal moment in its history.
That is why in early March the spiritual leaders of the Anglican,
Presbyterian and United Churches, along with representatives of the Roman
Catholic Church, and the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations,
will be participating in a multi-city tour to promote the work of the
upcoming Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

**Once established, the Commission will be an official independent body
that will oversee a process to provide former students
and anyone who has been affected by the Indian Residential School legacy, with an
opportunity to share their individual experiences
in a safe and culturally appropriate manner
through statement taking or truth-sharing.**

**"We believe it is essential that Canadians
pay close attention to this process of truth telling,"
explains Hon. David MacDonald,
the United Church's Special Advisor on residential schools,
and one of the organizers
of the leaders' tour.**

**MacDonald adds,
"This is the opportunity for all of us
to hear the voices of the children who attended residential schools,
to listen to their stories, and to learn,
maybe for the first time,
of the impact that
residential schools have had on
Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities."**

**"We see this tour as an opportunity to model what
a new and positive relationship between
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people
might look like"**

**Hearing to Understand
begins to build bridges rather than walls
whether it is between us and those we live with on a daily basis
or between us and the strangers we meet
or between nation to nation
...the outcry to become a world that listens**

....listens to the pain of one another
.....listens to the outcry of creation
.....listens to our own pain that we carry
that diminishes our energy for the present moment
.....listens so we may understand
....is an outcry that is getting louder and louder in its pain
.....but there is hope – when we are willing to listen
we become makers of peace
....when we are willing to let our hearts be open to hear....
then love flows through us to bring healing to our lives and to the world....
God so loves this world.....
and that love is made known through you and I
Hearing to Understand
May it be so.... Amen