Third Sunday of the Year, Cycle C

Old St. Pat, 2022

While it might seem passé

- in this era of texting and Instagram

Snapchat and YouTube

WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Google hangouts -

Nonetheless, the spoken word can still be a powerful medium

For engaging minds and changing hearts.

Market evidence for this assertion

Is found in the continued rise of audiobooks in popularity.

The audio Publishers Association, for example,

Noted that in 2020, the last year there are complete statistics

71,000 audio books were published in the U.S.

A 39% increase over the previous year

Generating revenues to the tune of 1.3 billion dollars that year. [[1]](#endnote-1)

It’s not just this market trend, however,

That underscores the power and potential of the spoken word.

Note, for example, that while U.S. Constitution

Does not require that the Commander in Chief

To deliver a live state of the union address

- Thomas Jefferson notably abandoned the practice

And sent a written message to Congress –

A practice that continued well into the 20th century

Presidents since Woodrow Wilson have embraced

The power of the in-the-flesh, personally vocalized address

As a way not only to report to Congress

But also to advocate for preferred policies and legislation.

So, despite the COVID surge

You know Biden isn’t going to bypass this bully pulpit

Even though it’s been pushed off until March.

While the spoken word can be effective, even influential

It is not infallible, either in its speaking or its hearing.

A malapropism is the mistaken use of an incorrect word

in place of a similarly sounding word

resulting in at least nonsensical if not humorous results

You may remember Mike Tyson complaining, for example,

That he was “falling into Bolivian”

Or Dan Quayle’s contention that

“Republicans understand the importance of bondage

Between a mother and child”

Or Yogi Berra announcing that

“Texas has a lot of electrical votes”

So with some regularly we often misspeak

And maybe with even more regularity we mishear.

A mondegreen is the mishearing of a phrase or song lyric

That prompts the substitution of similar sounding words

Resulting in new, sometimes quite amusing meanings.[[2]](#endnote-2)

These “earslips” are quite common among children, for example,

One 7-year-old thought “I pledge allegiance to the flag”

Was actually, “I led a pigeon to the flag.”

Another phrase in that pledge that gets jumped in children’s ears

Is “one nation, indivisible”

That sometimes comes out as

“one nation, in a dirigible”

“one nation, and a vegetable,” and even

“one naked individual.”

But, of course, it’s not just children who mishear

Adults do this all the time – especially with song lyrics:[[3]](#endnote-3)

“This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius”

Often comes out as the dawning of “the age of asparagus”

The line in “Desperado” by the Eagles that goes

“you’ve been out riding fences, for so long now”

Gets reinterpreted as

“You’ve been outright offensive, for so long now”

And of course, the Beatles “Lucy in the sky with Diamonds”

Has that ear puzzle “The girl with kaleidoscope eyes’  
 which regularly gets interpreted as

“The Girl with colitis goes by.”

What prompts these excursions into malapropisms and mondegreens

About misspeaking and mishearing

Are distinctive lectionary texts appointed for our hearing today

That both underscore the power of the Word for our believing

But also the danger in that Word

That is easily misunderstood, misappropriated

Or simply dismissed as irrelevant.

Today’s opening lection from the book of Nehemiah

Offers an idealized narrative of God’s chosen people

Listening attentively to the book of the law

* The book of Deuteronomy as we call it –

Being deeply moved by that word

Understanding it through the interpretation of Ezra

And through that word being reconstituted as a people

After the decimating experience of the exile.

The idealized, even romanticized nature of this text

Is evident in a description that reports that the reading

took place from early morning until midday

Like from dawn till noon … so maybe 6 hours?  
and the people were apparently attentive through it all.

I can’t imagine attempting such a thing

With a contemporary congregation.

But what is important here is not a calculation of minutes

But a calculus of commitment

That is possible and even required

When one immerses themselves in God’s word.

There is an apparently true story of a toddler

Whose favorite story book was kept by his bedside

And his mother read it to him almost every night

For weeks on end.

One day the mother found the toddler standing on the book

Pushing very hard with his little feet

And obviously getting very frustrated.

The mother was at a loss to understand

Or ease his frustration

Until the six-year-old sister explained

That Tony liked the book so much

He wanted to become part of the story.

Nehemiah seems to be telling us something similar

About the fractured and broken Israelites

Who wanted again to become part of God’s saving story.

While this first reading is meant to compliment the Gospel

Jesus’ own inaugural state of the kingdom address

To his hometown crowd

Luke’s story has a very different ending …

Though we have to wait until next week

To hear the end of this episode

That literally turns into a “cliff hanger”

For while there is initial admiration

For the local kid made good

Eventually his neighbors rise up in indignation

Drag him to a cliff on the edge of town

And attempt an early disposal of the Son of God.

They clearly neither had the ears nor the stomach

To hear such a justice message,

by this uppity kid from the hood.

I think that many of us live between Nehemiah and Luke

Between wanting to become part of God’s saving story

But wanting to edit out certain parts of that story

With its messages about poverty of spirit

Embracing enemies, lifting up the lowly

And accepting death as the path to eternal life.

Paul often tussled with the Corinthian community

Who had similar difficulties entering the Jesus narrative.

In today’s second reading he offers a solution to this dilemma

With an original proposal about our spiritual physiology

and while in his discourse on feet and eyes and hands

he doesn’t make any explicit reference to the ear

[which he does in some other writings][[4]](#endnote-4)

In light of today’s other texts

He is reminding us that the earbone is connected to the heartbone

And we need to continuously adjust our perceptions

So that God’s Word can break through

Our many forms of impaired hearing.

I recently read a story about Ben Underwood[[5]](#endnote-5)

Born in 1992 in Sacramento

he went blind from retinoblastoma by the time he was 3.

His visionary mother was determined that he should

Experience his childhood like any other kid

So she made practice jumping up and down steps

Doing other challenging spatial tasks.

Eventually Ben began to adapt by clicking with his tongue,

making clicking noises against the roof of his mouth

And listening to the sounds that bounced back to him

What is technically known as echolocation

The same sonar technique that allows bats

To perceive their environments

He literally changed his brain in the process

So he could interpret the world around him

Without sight.

In this new acoustic landscape

He could differentiate a parked car from a parked truck

He could recognize a particular neighbor by her walk

He played basketball and tetherball

And even beat his brother at video games

Simply by learning the significance of the different sounds.

Neuroscientists confirm that we can actually

Transform our brain’s capacity to perceive

In new and surprising ways, as did Ben Underwood.

Analogously, is it not possible for the baptized

Under the guidance that same Spirit

Jesus invokes in today’s gospel

To transform our heart’s capacity to perceive

In liberating and grace filled ways

By learning the “Jesus click”

Acquiring the gift of cardio-location

For hearing the very heartbeat of God

in the world around us and in each other?

Paula Underwood, a member of the Iroquois Nation

Tells the story of her father teaching her to listen.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Whenever someone said something to us, Dad would say,

“You remember what he said, honey?”

Paula got very good at repeating verbatim what people said

Even if they were quite long discourses.

One elderly gentleman, Mr. Thompson, would often come by

And tell her father stories.

Eventually Paula learned all of Mr. Thompson’s stories

And could repeat them with great accuracy.

In a turning point in her own perception

Her Dad once said, “I know you know his story,

“but did you hear his heart.”

Paula’s perceptual world opened up that day, as she responded,

“Yes, he is very lonely and comes and shares his memories

Because he’s asking you to keep him company

In his memories.”

She later reflected, that at that moment,

Her heart echoed his heart.

And concludes “when you can listen at that level …

You can hear what the Universe is saying.”

**Cooney – Change our Hearts**

The celebrated 20th century theologian Karl Rahner

characterized human beings as “hearers of the word”

his way of stressing that by our very nature

we are instinctively attuned to God’s own self-communication.

Metaphorically we might have eyelids

But we don’t have ear-lids

And are physiologically open to the very speaking of God.

But sometimes we have spiritual ear blockage

An inability to hear God speaking

Through unfamiliar, sometimes accented voices

That sound an internal alarm

About some potential enemy

Rather than another child of God.

On this “auditory Sunday”

We pray for a stronger connection

Between earbone and heartbone

Between attending and embracing

Between listening and loving

That we might grow into authentic hearers of the word

With renewed hearts

And open spirits

Through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://publishingperspectives.com/2021/06/audio-publishers-association-12-percent-audiobook-revenue-growth-in-2020-covid19/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gavin Edwards, *When a Man Loves a Walnut* (New York: Fireside, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://stacker.com/stories/3387/lyrics-50-famously-misunderstood-songs-explained> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. E.g., Romans 10:14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Beau Lotto, *Deviate: The Science of Seeing Differently* (New York-Boston: Hachette Books, 2017), 66-68. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [If You Really Pay Attention, by Paula Underwood (awakin.org)](https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=654) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)