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)