



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**

**June 26, 2016**

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## **“The Gift of Hearing”**

*(Romans 10:17)*

Rev. David K. Groth

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

**COLLECT:** Lord of all power and might, author and giver of all good things, graft into our hearts the love of Your name and nourish us with all goodness that we may love and serve our neighbor; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Tomorrow, a hearing loop is being installed at Good Shepherd. If you wear a hearing aide, or have a cochlear implant, I think you're really going to like this. It will help you hear. The installer, Lisa Zovar, has made it her life's work to help people hear. She knows firsthand how it feels to lose and then recover one's hearing. Today, Lisa's hearing is excellent. 6-7 weeks ago, she was mostly deaf and reading lips. I sat down with her outside a Madison coffee house and asked her about it.

Her hearing loss began when she was in her twenties. By thirty she was wearing hearing aids. For a time she could bluff her way through conversations, using reason and logic to fill in the blanks. But as the hearing loss progressed, she wasn't able to bluff anymore. In fact, eventually fire trucks were even sneaking up on her.

To lose your ability to hear is a tremendous loss. I don't want to sound compassionless about people born deaf, but they never had their hearing to lose in the first place, and typically, they become part of a very tightly-knit community of the deaf. Lisa was born with full hearing, gradually lost all of it, and was at risk of losing her community, her friends, her livelihood. "It's not just a biological disability" she told me, "It's also a psychological and social disability."

Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, said, "Blindness separates us from things, but deafness separates us from people." Lisa explained: "You retreat from conversations. You get embarrassed and frustrated by always having to say, "Sorry? I didn't hear that." You're shut out of conversations. "Never mind" becomes a refrain used by hearing people. It's not used maliciously. We say that when we don't think the small talk is worth the effort of

communicating. But the small talk is so important to relationships. It's kind of like the oil that reduces friction between moving parts. And when people with hearing loss are told, "Never mind" over and over again, it feels like they've been dismissed. Hearing loss affects some people so much that they drop out of your world. At parties Lisa spent a lot of time on the floor with the host's dog, pretending to be the world's greatest dog lover, when in reality, it was because she couldn't hear what people were saying even with hearing aids.

Lisa taught herself how to read lips. I asked her about it. Yes, when the camera zooms in on football players, she can tell what they say to one another, and, quote, "Oh my, the language they use." Yes, she would sit at a café and practice on people 20 feet away, and yes, she has been busted for doing so. She was practicing on a fellow having a rather animated and interesting conversation with someone. He came over and confronted Lisa asking, "Is there a problem?" She said, "You're just so handsome I couldn't take my eyes off you." It was a bald faced lie but he believed it and walked away a happy man.

But the problem with lip reading is that if she couldn't see your face, she couldn't hear you. To have a conversation with her husband at night, she would say, "Turn on the lights so I can hear you." To have a conversation with her husband in the car would require the driver to take his/her eyes off the road, which, of course means, no more small talk, just silence.

When I met Lisa a couple of months ago, she was recovering from cochlear implant surgery, which is a medical device that replaces the function of the inner ear. For a few weeks after the surgery, they have to let the swelling go down before activating the implants. And then the brain needs time to learn again how to hear. The surgery activates cells in your brain that haven't worked for decades. That's why Lisa says, and this is important: the sooner you start treating your hearing loss, the more you can maintain your hearing. Those cells stay active. And I didn't know

this, but hearing loss is also linked to dementia and Alzheimer's. The theory is you're using so much of your brain to understand and communicate that other areas are left untended. We like to think that hearing loss is a relatively inconsequential part of aging, but it's not, socially, psychologically, or, I would add, spiritually.

In any event, after the activation of her implants and the usual adjustment period, Lisa heard birds singing . . . for the first time in decades. Can you imagine? She walked outside and told her husband, "It sounds like a jungle out here!" All the little sounds again, of wind rustling the leaves, the squeaks of a newborn baby, talking in the car with her husband without have to face one another. She and her husband can engage in small talk again. Her husband admitted it's the small talk he missed the most. Even the sound of scraping the food on her plate together with a fork ("Wow, is that obnoxious" she said. "How long have I been doing that?")

When Lisa and I were visiting there were loud trucks driving by, but the noise pollution didn't bother her nearly as much as it did me because she could whip out a little device and adjusted her settings. I wasn't able to do that. She laughed and said, "My ears are so much more cool than yours. I even have built-in Bluetooth!" Over and over again she spoke of how life-changing it is for her to hear clearly again. Remember, all these things (minus the blue tooth!) were given that man to whom Jesus said one word, "Ephphatha!"

In any event, the hearing loop is being installed tomorrow here at Good Shepherd. What this means is if you wear cochlear implants . . . or you wear hearing aids that have the little telecoils in them (and most of them do now), clear, crisp sound will be transmitted directly to your hearing device.

Lisa checked the national registry and this sanctuary will be the first place in Watertown to have a hearing loop. We owe a debt of gratitude to Esther Uttech and her family who are making this hearing loop possible. Esther died a

number of months ago at the age of 101. She gradually lost most of her hearing. She would have benefited from the hearing loop. It would have helped her stay in church longer than she did. But she couldn't hear the sermon or the prayers or have a meaningful conversation with others. So I'm sure you can understand why people with hearing loss often drop out of church. This hearing loop is going to be a very good thing for a number of our members.

Hearing loops are not cheap, and we'll have to move and replace a whole bunch of chairs, but if any place has a vested interest in people being able to hear, it's God's church.

Psalm 78, "O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth."

John 10, "My sheep listen to my voice."

In Luke 10, before sending them out to preach, Jesus says to the seventy-two, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

Also in Luke 10, Jesus noticed that while Martha worked herself into a tantrum, her sister Mary chose what was better and sat at his feet "listening to what he said" (v. 42).

At the baptism of Jesus and the Transfiguration, we hear the voice of the Father telling us, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

One more from Isaiah 55, "Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul will live." Did you hear that? The Lord says "Hear me that your soul will live." Hearing, listening, and apprehending for yourself the Word of the Lord is necessary for faith and salvation.

Don't let vanity and pride get in the way of having your hearing checked or wearing hearing aids. Being able to hear God's Word is worth the sacrifices to vanity and pride.

Trouble is, in general, with or without hearing aids, we don't hear very well. Most pastors agree that while

preaching God's Word, we can count on a good 11 or 12 minutes of attention span. After that . . . At an indoor wedding, I find I have about eight minutes. At an outdoor wedding, with all the distractions, I've got about four. I learned that the hard way. It was a beautiful day at a beautiful outdoor venue overlooking the rolling hills of Wisconsin. I thought I had pretty good stuff. I thought it was well prepared. I knew it was faithful to the text. But about 5,6 minutes in, I had lost them, lost them all. It felt like a filibuster.

In general, we're not very good hearers. We are so distractible. And we get so fixated on ourselves, our own judgments, our own opinions, our own troubles, our own needs, our own assumptions and beliefs that we don't listen very well to each other, and even less so to God's Word. Remember, there's this natural animosity toward God. Paul wrote, "The sinful mind is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law nor can it do so." So we'd rather keep God at arm's length. We'd rather not hear his Word, nor allow it to penetrate into our hearts.

But there's a problem . . . a big one. "Faith comes by hearing" Paul wrote, "and hearing by the word of Christ." If faith comes by hearing, it follows that faith can be lost by not hearing, by cutting ourselves off from God's Word.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says one simple word to a man born deaf: "Ephthatah!" It's an Aramaic imperative which means, "Open up!" Not a miracle that makes a big splash, we think . . . unless you happen to be that man who was deaf. But it's also a small miracle which points to one much greater. Some are born physically deaf. All are born spiritually deaf . . . until God opens our ears to his Word! When that happens, that change, that transformation is just as dramatic! And it's the Spirit of God that makes it happen. Paul wrote, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them." That is, we need the Holy Spirit to heal us of our spiritual deafness. Otherwise we will not hear the Word of God.

Surely the gift of the Spirit in Holy Baptism does something for our hearing. In the early Latin Church, that word “Ephphatha!” was said as part of the baptismal liturgy. That is, the priest would press his fingers into the ears of the baby and then place one into the baby’s mouth and say, “Ephphatha!” to show that it’s the Spirit’s work in Baptism to unstop little ears to his Word and open up little hearts, and liberate little tongues to confess the faith. Don’t think little ones can believe or confess the faith? You should spend time with some of our preschoolers. Their faith makes yours look puny!

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” Therefore, listen to him, because it’s not going to come any other way. Not by osmosis. Not by family tradition. Not by reason or strength. Listen to him, even though his thoughts are not your thoughts. Listen to him, especially when his thoughts are not your thoughts, because then you know it’s the true God we’re talking about and not some idol carved by our culture to be completely in synch with the prevailing values of the day! “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Listen to him, when he says through one of his called ministers, “By the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Lord says what he means and means what he says, so listen to him. Listen when he says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:54). Listen to him when he promises, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mk. 16:16). Listen to him when he says, “Whoever hears my words and believes . . . has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has already crossed over from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). Listen to him, because who else can make such promises and keep them? Only Jesus has the words of eternal life! (Jn. 6:68). Listen to him!

Hearing loss is not just a biological disability. It turns into a psychological and social disability and can quickly become a spiritual disability. So, if you or your family suspect

there's a problem, have your hearing checked. Hearing aids won't make you look old. They'll make you look smart.

For Lisa Zovar, it was life changing when she went from being basically deaf to having excellent hearing. Even more so, it is life changing when we move (or are moved by the Spirit) from being deaf to God's Word, to hearing and believing. In both cases, thanks be to God for the gift of hearing! Amen.