

## **Itching Ears**

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Some of my work is available online, sermons from this church are out there as podcasts and videos. I have done some writing for online publications about faith and theology.

Only a couple of things I have ever done have been picked up by any sort of wider audience, and to be honest they are not the things I would have thought. There is no accounting for the wiles of the internet.

But a several years ago I wrote a piece about renewable energy making a connection to the the story of the Israelites receiving manna from heaven in the wilderness.

The idea was that in this Biblical story, God provides the Israelites with the food they need for each day, it falls freely from heaven and is theirs to collect, but not to hoard. It spoils each day.

I made the connection to wind and solar power, the gift of the energy we need, freely poured out from God each day, enough for what we need, but not really able to be accumulated or hoarded.

I was reasonably happy with the piece, not my favorite thing I had ever written but I thought it was clever.

It got picked up by a newsletter sent to Presbyterian ministers each week to help them with their sermons, and then started kicking around twitter a bit.

And, as often happens, the comment section started filling up, and my email inbox swelled.

Of those who were critical, and there were a great many, there was one scripture passage they turned to again and again to make their case against me.

It was the one we just heard: “For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

It is not unusual for me to get letters in the office at the church here, or emails, from people across the country who have a bit too much time on their hands and spend their days policing the doctrine of churches of which they are not a part.

We get letters criticizing our membership in the United Church of Christ, a denomination that celebrates human intellect and scientific discovery as means of understanding God in the world. We get letters of “concern” for my soul as I lead people astray by encouraging us to listen for God’s voice in our own conscience alongside the voice of scripture and tradition.

But far and away more than these, we get letters and emails criticizing our embrace of LGBTQ people as our kin in Christ.

And it is common that those messages feature this verse of scripture, along with the accusation that I am what is known as —the parlance of more theologically conservative corners of the church— an “itchy ears preacher.”

So when I saw this verse pop up as the lectionary text for this week, my first instinct was to do something different. But as I spent some time with this passage, I actually came to really love the heart of the message, and I also came to really resent the way this verse has been weaponized against progressive approaches to Christian theology.

Because I think the warning offered here in scripture is one that points to a hard truth about our human nature. Not just observed by wise voices among ancient teachers, but also documented by statisticians and neuroscientists.

And that hard truth is that we humans gravitate toward perspectives that confirm our existing beliefs. Scientists call this “confirmation

bias.” Looking at all available information, we focus on whatever confirms our existing attitudes and beliefs, and disregard the rest.

We engage the information that suits us, and almost unconsciously let the rest slip quietly past.

If you read information that paints a preferred political party or figure in negative light, are you more likely to question your own perspective, or question whether the source is trustworthy?

There is something innate to us that accumulates information to backup what we already believe. There is something innate to us that at a deep level resists being challenged or changed.

Jesus himself was a victim of this kind of thinking at a societal level. Again and again in the gospel accounts of his life, we read stories about powerful figures who were “looking for a reason to condemn him.” Jesus challenged the prevailing religious wisdom of his time, he cracked the warring heart of empire with a word of peace. He

pressed for the place of human dignity and worth against a world that sought so often to belittle and reject the powerless.

The ears of powerful itched and itched for any scrap of information they could use to condemn Christ, and once they built the flimsiest of cases, they rushed a sham trial, and hung him on a hill to die.

As happened so many times before, and has happens still, the powerful chose a preferred outcome and then built a case to support it.

And unfortunately, despite being an early victim of this sort of runaway human cruelty, it did not take too long for the Christian church to become a perpetuator of it.

In our own country a prominent minister not so long ago leveled a strong accusation against progressive christians, warning that they should consider if “by interfering with this long-standing institution, we are impeding the work which God ordained.” and if we should not

instead be teaching people “where their weakness lies, and how to acquire obedience, how to adapt to their condition, and acquire strength for the struggle of such a life.”

Those words come from an Episcopalian Bishop named Stephen Elliot in 1853. The institution he was talking about was slavery.

Along with the prevailing teaching of most Christian churches in the country at the time, he considered it a clear open and shut case that the Bible defended the institution of slavery, and those who fought for freedom were just massaging the clear message of the bible to conform to newly emerging values.

In looking back today on those who used the messages of scripture to justify slavery, it is all too obvious that they were simply turning to religious texts for a permission structure to justify a morally indefensible practice.

Turning to the words of the same book from which they sought justification, we might say that they "accumulated for themselves teachings to suit their own desires, and turned away from listening to the truth."

I don't mean to imply that I, or any of us, is immune to this temptation. It is tempting to simply mine our tradition and our sacred texts and pull out the pieces that offer support to what we want to believe.

I mean, as I confessed to you at the beginning of this sermon, I was inclined to just let this text pass by without taking it up as a text for preaching.

The truth is that all of our ears itch, all of our minds search frantically in the world for information that justifies and supports what we already believe. We all do this, and we all need to discipline ourselves to listen for God's voice and God's call carefully. We need to take



deep breaths as we take in the world and ask God always to keep us open.

In the end, I actually think those people emailing me have it backwards. Because if the word of God is meant to be good news to the world, then perhaps mining it for a permission structure to remain stuck in the past is not really faithful at all.

And if God loved the world so much, that God was unwilling to leave it unchanged, and if God sought to transform the world in sending Christ, and renew the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If God is continually at work in human hearts, and in our lives, and in our world, then the mark of faithfulness is not being unchanged and unmoved.

The mark of faithfulness is allowing our hearts to be transformed. Repenting of the errors of our past. And committing to an ever more loving and just future.

Today's scripture is not a gentle request to leave everything the way it is, it is a bold call to the sort of faith that will set people free.

It is a challenge to you and to me to not spend our days accumulating more and more voices that tell us we are completely right and do not need to be changed.

And it is cautionary word, reminding us to watch out for those who trade-in a relationship with the living God, for voices that suit their own desires. Who, as scripture says, "turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

But most of all it is a solemn warning, that all of us are susceptible to this temptation.

And it is equally tempting to make faith another easy answer that scratches the itch. That confirms for us everything we already believe, and reassures us in our certainty.

But true faith is not so simple, it is rather the invitation to be ever open to what God might do next, and the challenge to have hearts that are ever ready to be transformed.