

## THE SPIRIT IN EARS AND HANDS

### Scripture Readings: Acts 6:1-6, Exodus 2:23-25

I want you to take a look at our Old Testament Reading this morning, the verses in Exodus 2 that serve as a transition into the story of Israel's liberation. It also marks a political transition in the life of Egypt. The King before this one knew Joseph and had sheltered the Hebrew people from the famine in Israel. Through Joseph's influence, he had saved their lives. Then the new King named himself Pharaoh, enslaved the Hebrews and, to control their population, instructed the midwives to kill every Hebrew baby boy. Of course, it was only "population control" from his point of view. We would use a different name for it: genocide.

*"After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose to God. God hear their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.*

This passage tells us that, under Pharaoh's thumb, under the heavy hand of violent oppression, the Israelites groan and cry out. And God hears their cries.

Now, please notice something important here: they do not cry out to God, these Israelites. The God of their ancestors - the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Hagar and Ishmael, of Isaac and Rebekkah – to them this God was the stuff of myth and legend and long forgotten. They did not cry out to God because they had forgotten that such a one existed. For them the world was only pain and labor, hard economic realities and a hopeless future. All they knew was their pain and that's what caused them to cry out.

And God hears their cries.

Even though the cries were not directed God's way, God hears their cries.

Even though there is no plea for God to intervene, God hears their cries.

Even though the people have no memory of God, no hope in God, no idea that God even exists, God hears their cries.

This is one of those totally mysterious, transcendent moments in scripture – a moment like the that of Creation, a moment like that of the Incarnation, a moment like that of the Resurrection – a moment that defines our faith because it reveals something completely unanticipated about the one in whom we place our faith: God hears the cries of the abused. That's who God is. God hears them not because we ask God to, not because we have such great and excellent faith in God, not because we have said the right words or belong to the right religion. God hears the cries of the abused because that's who God is.

And now the real story of the Bible, the story of God's relationship with us and our relationship with one another, can begin. It begins with hearing. It begins with ears.

Our New Testament Reading, a story from the early Christian Church in Jerusalem, puts those Christians and their leaders to the test: are they able to hear like God hears? Can they use their ears?

*“Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.’ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”*

The Hellenists complained, Luke tells us, but here’s how it ought to be translated: the Hellenists *“murmured...”* You know where we are now, don’t you? We’re in the wilderness, the place of murmuring. We’re in that place between now and not yet, between a past that doesn’t work anymore and a future that hasn’t yet arrived. The Hellenists *“murmured...”*

We read earlier in Acts that *“there was not a needy person among them”* in the early Christian community (Acts 4:34) because the resources of the believers were *“distributed to each as any had need”* (v. 35). But scholar Karl Kuhn reminds us that resources in the Roman world were typically give out according to social rank. When you hear stories of influence peddling and star power being applied to Covid-19 vaccine distribution, and when you hear that we’re living in the largest gap between rich and poor in the history of our nation, you think that times haven’t changed much. Even the early Christian Church wasn’t immune as we learn in our passage with one class of needy Christians getting a daily distribution of food while another class has been ignored.

Can we listen like God listens? Can we hear the cries of powerless, the abused, the hungry, the outsiders?

After this last Fall’s wonderful Plant-a-Row harvest was distributed to St. Joseph’s Food Pantry, there was the usual conversations about how it went and how we might approach next year’s planting. One of our Plant-a-Row folks observed how hard it was to keep up with cherry tomato plants. When they’re ready to harvest, they come in bunches and will often split or fall to the ground because it’s so hard to keep up with them.

I have great sympathy for this observation and have had my own disagreement on this particular subject with my partner gardener. (I’m avoiding the word “spouse” here.) If it were up to me, no more cherry tomatoes! When our Plant-a-Row organizers talked with the food pantry after the harvest, they thanked them and our church profusely for hearing the cries of the hungry. And they added, *“You know what our clients really liked? The cherry tomatoes!”* (I kid you not!) Guess what we’re making sure to plant this Spring? Cherry tomatoes.

The Spirit asks us to LISTEN even if what we hear leads us to places we don’t want to go. Being a Spirit-filled person means using your EARS.

It means something else as well.

The check-out clerk in the small town I served as Pastor was running my butter and milk and bread through the scanner when she suddenly blurted out to me, *“I know that God wants me to work with abused women!”* We had a talk about it then and there, as I passed her my check card and she handed me the receipt. I made some suggestions about how and where she might follow that call.



The next time I saw her at the supermarket I gave her some phone numbers of shelters, of people and places she might contact.

The next time I saw her we talked about it some more, but then she changed the subject.

She hadn't followed up on my suggestions. More importantly she hadn't followed upon the Spirit's call. From then on, whenever I saw her at check-out it hung uncomfortably between us. I didn't want to be a source of pain and regret for her, and I also didn't want to feel like some kind of guilt-monster when I was just picking up groceries. So I started walking through someone else's check-out line.

She heard something but she didn't act on it. And I had heard something and hadn't found a best way to support the Spirit's calling of her.

We worship a God who heard the cries of Hebrew slaves. We serve a savior who in his dying agony heard the request of a criminal. We are part of a Church that has had apostles and saints and sinners like you and me who work at hearing the needs of those around us, not plugging our ears from the cries of the abused. That's who the Church is supposed to be.

And that's when the Spirit ask us to move from EARS to HANDS. That's when the Spirit asks us to reach out and let the Spirit flow through our HANDS.

Here's an inside baseball tidbit about church unity. The UCC, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are in what would be described as full communion with one another, recognizing each other's weddings, baptisms and communion, and the ordination of one another's clergy. That's why it was so easy for us on the Pastoral Search Committees to put on our eye patches, strap on our fake wooden legs, and, with a parrot on our shoulder and a tricorne feathered hat on our heads, go and raid the Presbyterian Church to get Pastor Nick and Pastor Laurie. Okay, I'm kidding... mostly. But the full communion thing is real, and we're a living example of it here at First Congo.

The UCC has been in conversation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the Episcopal denomination in hopes of being in full communion with them as well, but here's the sticking point; they think that our clergy haven't been properly ordained because of our lack of apostolic succession. Say that with me, "Apostolic succession."





For them, apostolic succession means the Apostle Peter laid hands on this guy, this guy then laid hands on that guy, and so on and so forth all the way through to the present day. They would recognize me and Nick and Laurie as proper clergy only if we were willing to have one of their bishops lay hands on us and ordain us “properly.”



Like I said, “inside baseball” and something you probably find trivial and meaningless; maybe you even find it to be just another way for the church hierarchy to hold onto control by making sure the power flows through them, including the power of the Holy Spirit.



But we have a very different view of apostolic succession, one that’s evident in our passage from Acts. As new officers of the early Church – Deacons - are being called, the calling is being done by... **the people** based on the people’s discernment of who has been “*filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom.*” The Holy Spirit is not something that can be controlled and directed at our whim. As Jesus said, “*The Spirit blows where it will; you can hear the sound of it but you know not whence it comes or whither it goes*” (John 3:8).



And in the early Church, the Spirit found a home in surprising people, people with names like Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. Later on in Acts, the called will include names like Tabitha, Lydia, and Priscilla, just as the names of the called here at First Congo has gone beyond the Johns and Stephens with names like Jane and Kathryn and Laurie. You get what Luke is saying? With the calling of “Hellenized” Deacons, the early church is not just hearing the cries of outsiders but also empowering outsiders to work, to receive and share the work of the Spirit. As Paul put it, “... *in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female.*”

I was privileged to serve two Presbyterian Churches during my seminary student days, one just south of Duluth and one just north of Rochester. My favorite annual part of worship in those country churches was when they would call new deacons and all the existing deacons – probably a little more than half of everybody there - would come up onto the chancel and lay hands on them. And we’d pray for the Holy Spirit to flow through us to those new Deacons, those servants of the Gospel.

That’s how the Spirit begins to work through our HANDS.

She doesn’t have to pass through ordained hands, through male hands, through female, transgender or genderless hands. The hands don’t have to be rough or smooth, old or young, strong or shaky, Catholic or Protestant or Free Baptist or whatever to pass on or receive the Spirit. She moves through hands like yours; hands like mine.

- Hands like Jesus’ hands:

*“As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases through them to him; and he laid his hands of each of them and cured them” (Luke 4:40).*

Or

*“And (Jesus) took the children in his arms and began blessing them, laying his hands on them”  
(Mark 10:16).*

- Hands like the Apostles’ hands:

*“Then Peter and John laid their hands on (the Samaritans), and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-19).*

- Hands like Moses’ hands:

*“So the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and place your hand upon him’” (Numbers 27:18).*

- Hands like my mother’s hands, rubbing my flat feet when they hurt so much at the end of the day.
- Hands like my sister’s hands who scratched my father’s head to his great delight.
- Hands like my eighth grade “kind of” girlfriend as we held hands in the bleachers.
- Hands like my spouse who put a ring on my finger.
- Hands like all the doctors and nurses and med techs who made sure the stethoscope was warm, that the blood-draw was uneventful, that I was warm enough and did all the hundred little things that gave me peace when I was most afraid.
- Hands like those who are administering the Covid-19 vaccine as best and fast as they can.
- Hands like yours who have given me a sincere handshake, a loving embrace, pat on the back, or a reassuring hand on the shoulder.
- Hands like ours when we reach out to touch one another even in times of social distancing – writing notes, dialing their phone numbers, typing an email, hitting the “join” button for a zoom get-together, signing a check to support the work of those who have heard the cries of those around them.

EARS and HANDS – that’s what the Holy Spirit needs of us. Ears and Hands.

Whose cries have you been hearing? And how have your hands gone to work bringing comfort and hope, peace and justice?