

“On Hearing Voices”

Willow Glen United Methodist Church

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Acts 9:1-20; Revelation 5:11-14

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Twenty-nine years ago, I heard a voice. I was a seminary student at the time, praying one morning in Duke Chapel when the voice said: *These hands can heal.*

The voice was so real that my eyes popped open expecting to see someone beside me. No one was there.

What I remember all these years later is how ordinary everything seemed--the dark wood of the pews; the soft spring light as it came through the stained glass and puddled in colors on the floor; the lawn mower that droned steadily somewhere outside. How ordinary everything seemed—and suddenly how extraordinary.

*These hands can heal.*

The lectionary texts for today have three people hearing voices. Saul hears a voice; Ananias hears a voice; John of Patmos hears a lot of voices.

- Saul is on his way to Damascus when a light from heaven flashes, he falls to the ground, and he—and all the men who are with him—hear a voice asking a question: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”
- Ananias hears a voice in a less public, more solitary way. This voice is “In a vision,” as the book of Acts puts it and directs Ananias to go lay hands on Saul and heal him of his blindness.
- In the book of Revelation, John of Patmos first hears “the voice of many angels” and then he hears the voices of “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea...” John tells us that all of his voices—creatures and angels alike—are singing.

These texts only scratch the surface of voice hearing in the Bible. Moses hears a voice coming out of a burning bush; Elijah hears a still, small voice in the wilderness—what in Hebrew is “the sound of a slender silence”; Jesus hears a voice calling him “beloved” as he stands in the River Jordan. On and on we could go...

The point is that while we’re in Willow Glen United Methodist Church talking about faith, hearing voices is considered acceptable, even desirable, a sign that God is speaking. But what if we went to Julian Street Inn or Montgomery Street Inn or some other homeless shelter in San Jose? How would you feel about people there talking about hearing voices?

Or even more to the point, what if we went to one of the psychiatric units at Valley Medical, Stanford, El Camino, Kaiser, or Good Samaritan Hospitals? What about voice hearing then?

Here’s the problem: we deify voice-hearing in one context and all-but-demonize it in another. As a result, we’re guilty of a classic cognitive distortion—black and white thinking.

What if the truth about hearing voices is much more nuanced?

Don’t misunderstand me. Of course, there are serious medical conditions that can create an unrelenting hammering of voices in the brain and unimaginable suffering. Temporal lobe epilepsy, for example. Degenerative neurological diseases. And mental illnesses, especially schizophrenia. The fear we attach to this kind of voice hearing though—especially in the case of schizophrenia—is way out of proportion to what’s actually happening.

Stigma is born from such fear.

Do you know what the most frequent cause of voice hearing actually is? Grief.

I can’t tell you how many times someone who has been recently widowed has told how they “heard” their husband or wife just as clear as a bell. “I was in the kitchen last night, Pastor, and I know I heard Henry call me from the den.”

Voices can be a sign of the mind's creative capacity to cope. In the case of the widowed, the mind is trying to cope with profound loss. In the case of those diagnosed with schizophrenia, the mind is often trying to cope with some kind of severe trauma.

The question any voice-hearer needs to learn to ask is what function the voice or voices may be serving.

For Saul—soon to become Paul—the voice he heard was asking him to do some deep soul searching: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* The men who were with Saul on the road led him by the hand to Damascus. And for the next three days, the blind Saul neither ate nor drank anything. In other words, Saul took time to think deeply about the question the voice had posed.

In the case of Ananias, the voice asked him to take a serious risk, to approach the man who had been persecuting Christians. Ananias responded to the voice saying, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem..." Translation: thank you very much but I'd really rather not have anything to do with him—and yet, Ananias found the courage to act.

The voices John of Patmos records are of a much more mystical bent—angels and creatures are all singing together. For this man living in exile, the voices gave him joyful community.

The question any voice-hearer needs to learn to ask is what function the voice or voices may be serving—and that may be a difficult question to answer.

Back in 1990, I would have told you that the voice I heard had everything to do with what kind of ministry I was being called to do. *These hands can heal*. In fact, at first, I was worried that I was being called to be a faith healer, the kind of person who lays hands on the sick and they're miraculously made well. This was so far removed from my liberal, United Methodist upbringing that I gradually rejected this idea and settled into offering what healing I could as a local church pastor doing pastoral care and counseling.

After 15 years as a pastor, however, I was diagnosed with and ultimately hospitalized for adult-onset anorexia—and the words *these hands can heal* took on a whole new meaning as in: these hands, this body, this mind *can be* healed. The voice I'd heard all those years ago became not so much a directive as an assurance.

Today, I stand before you as a person who has come a long way in my recovery. Make no mistake—it's taken a decade and still I have symptoms I must manage—but I have healed.

Anorexia for me, however, has been much more than a psychiatric diagnosis or a physical state of emaciation; it has been my rugged path to a deeply spiritual place, what the ancient Celts ironically called “a thin place,” a place where the distance between heaven and earth collapses; a place where we catch glimpses of the divine; a place where we're jolted out of our old ways of seeing the world.

My old way of seeing the world was to make clear distinctions: pastors over here, psychiatric patients over there—but then I was both. My old way of seeing the world was to assign people to definitive categories: addict, schizophrenic, anorexic—until people did that to me, reduced all of me to a single word. My old way of seeing the world was a heartfelt desire to help people, until I was on the receiving end of such help and felt pitied and completely disempowered.

I'm now going to say something shocking. Ready? I no longer *help* anyone. Help by its very nature creates a hierarchy. I don't help people; I support them as they help themselves, and I seek to connect in a mutual and vulnerable way.

I acknowledge that this is a challenging sermon because I'm asking you to see voice-hearing—and in fact, any mental illness symptom—as part of our common humanity. I'm asking you to stop playing armchair psychiatrist; to stop believing the media's fear mongering; and even to reject the seductive allure of trying to fix, save, or coddle those “poor souls” with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, eating disorders, PTSD.

I'm asking you to see all human beings, all human minds, as “fearfully and wonderfully made” as the Psalmist puts it, and to believe as my friend Seona does that “every person has jewels in their heart.”

To close, let me show you some of the jewels I've seen in the hearts of people with serious and persistent mental illnesses:

- Remember the former homeless encampment called “The Jungle”? Hundreds of people lived there—among them a woman named Mary who even with her symptoms is one of the most serene people I've ever met. Mary sat in my office at NAMI one day and told me how other residents in the Jungle would come to her tent and simply sit beside her. “I didn't really understand why,” she said, “but I didn't mind. It happened so often, they started calling me “Mother Mary of the Jungle.”
- One of the symptoms of schizophrenia that my friend Mark has is writing excessively which he's channeled into being a Pen Pal with many people—including a man in prison and me. Mark's gracious heart is evident in every letter I receive from him as he begins, *“Most loved, lovely, loveable, loving, Cindy.”*
- Nancy has lost custody of her daughter because of her schizophrenia, but that hasn't stopped her from a deep love. Recently, Nancy wrote: *“You're only 7. I wish I could braid your hair. One day I will touch your heart.”*

Voice-hearers: Nancy. Mark. Mary of the Jungle. Me. Saul. Ananias. John—and my dear spiritual mentor, Stephen Pocklington, who has distilled everything I'm trying to say to these twelve words:

*Human beings aren't problems to be solved; they're mysteries to be honored.*

Amen.