

The Problem of Itching Ears
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

If there is one word that makes middle-of-the road Protestant Christians squirm, it's "evangelist."

Many of you leave church every week comfortably focused on the work of ministry you can do in God's name. Maybe you will attend the HELP rally this afternoon to fight for social justice or walk in the CROP walk at the end of the month. Maybe you worked on the last Caldwell Habitat build or are thinking about going to Guatemala in the spring. So many of you helped out in one way or the other to open the shelter for homeless women. Our loyal fish fry team worked hours yesterday to practice evangelism by perch and croaker.

And you have promised to do much more. As part of our Discipleship campaign, you prayerfully considered the long list of ministry opportunities at Caldwell. You picked one – or two or three or four – and you said, "Sign me up." Thanks be to God.

But what if there had been one more ministry "job description" on that list – that of evangelist? How many of you would have signed up for that?

We Presbyterians struggle with evangelism. It's OK to say that out loud. "My name is John. I am a Presbyterian and I am uncomfortable with evangelism." We want to leave that to the Baptists and the Pentacostals, the mega-churches or even the Methodists.

"Just don't make us do it!"

"The culture doesn't want to hear it," we say to ourselves. "I don't know how to evangelize, I don't have the right words. It feels weird to talk to a complete stranger or anyone else for that matter about faith and God."

"Besides," we say, "my actions speak for themselves."

Did any of you catch any of last week's PBS series on religion in America? It traced the religious evolution of our nation from the rigor of the Puritans to today's religious pluralism, ending with one clear message: America has become the most religiously

diverse nation in the world. That doesn't make evangelism any easier, does it? But what we're up against is no more difficult than what a Christian leader named Timothy faced in the early part of the second century AD.

Toward the back of the New Testament, you'll find three very short letters. Known as the Pastoral Epistles, they offer encouragement and counsel to leaders of the movement that was just beginning to be known as Christianity.

2 Timothy is positioned in scripture as being from the Apostle Paul to one of his most capable and well-traveled early church leaders, Timothy. Scholars who've dug into the details and examined the writing style question whether Paul actually wrote 2 Timothy. That shouldn't matter to us. Its message echoes Paul's, and it fits our quest to share the good news of the gospel in our day of religious diversity just as it did for Timothy in his.

Timothy evangelized in a swirl of secular, political, religious and cultural voices and forces every bit as complex as ours. The author of the letter must've known that Timothy was struggling. His flock was always going for the latest flashy, new idea. They were constantly getting swept up by the most recent Johnny-come-lately with a message as smooth and sweet as honey.

They had wandering eyes for the hot new teacher. They had bored minds easily captivated by the latest gimmick. Worst of all, they had *itching ears*.

It's a shame we're not sure who wrote this letter because that has to be one of the best phrases in all of scripture. As with "stiff-necked people," which described the stubborn Israelites, and "hardened heart," which described the Egyptian Pharaoh's cold resolve, 'itching ears' paints a vivid picture with an economy of words.

More than that, it's true! On so many levels, it's true. It speaks volumes about the struggles of evangelism and what Timothy – and all of us – have to deal with to get people simply to accept and be content with the plain and simple good news of the gospel.

Think for a minute about "itching." Physically, our bodies itch as a warning signal – an alarm that something is amiss, something is not right. Whether large or small, an itch says "Stop what you are doing or thinking about and pay attention to me." It demands our immediate attention.

If we're lucky, it's one of those mystery itches, a momentary distraction. There one second, gone the next. Maybe it's an old scar, something from our past that reminds us

it's still there. Or, maybe, on closer examination, we find we've been bitten by a bug or brushed up against poison ivy, something from outside of us that we didn't see coming. Nothing terribly serious but you'd better put something on that or it will get worse.

Then again, it might be something serious. As a dermatologist would remind us, the skin – the epidermis – is the largest organ of our body. If something is wrong, eventually it will manifest itself on the skin.

But this matter of itching is more than just physical. Itching shows just how closely connected our mental state is to the physical. Let's try something. I want you to get comfortable in your seats. Now, breathe deeply two or three times just to settle your body and your mind. Ready? Now, pay close attention to your body. Focus on what you're feeling head to toe.

Now, I want you to raise your hand when you feel or sense the first little itch. Go ahead. Let's be honest here.

See what I mean? The mental connection to itching can get much more serious, of course. People with certain mental illnesses might grope wildly, clawing at bugs that aren't really there. When a person goes through withdrawal from drugs or alcohol, their mind is doing the work but they scratch and flail as if they are on fire.

Finally, this subconscious aspect of mental itching must be closely connected to our emotions. What's that caution about marriage - about the seven-year itch, that point at which we're vulnerable to emotional boredom? Watch out - a sport car or something worse is just ahead!

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All of that is to say that the author of 2 Timothy must have known a great deal about physiology when he picked this metaphor of itching ears. If only he were really just talking about just our ears. He's not of course. This metaphor grabs and holds us because we know that everything that I've just said about physical itching is true about spiritual itching.

Sometimes, it takes just the smallest distraction to take our minds off God. It happens a dozen times a day. It might be simple daydreaming or the internet. It might be ESPN or one of those cooking reality shows. It might be a thought about someone we're not married to or an even more impure thought that violates a committed relationship. It might be a rationalization about how we live our lives, like telling ourselves that we're

not as bad or immoral as the next person. It says, "I want you to think about ME right now, nothing else."

Maybe the distraction is like an old scar, some part of our lives, some aspect of our thinking and feeling that once stood between us and God comes back and distances us from our creator again. We remember how nice it was in that time of life when we slept in on Sunday and stayed home and read the paper. We tell ourselves our lives were so much happier with the old crowd or when we had a few extra hours a month, hours that we now give in ministry.

All of those things are the kinds of itching that come from inside of us. But what the author of 2 Timothy is just as concerned about, if not more, is the influence of unsound teaching, preaching and doctrine.

"For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires." (4:3)

In other words, when you're preaching to the people, the author of this letter says, throw softballs. Tell them what they want to hear because, if you don't, the people will find someone who will. It's human nature, after all and it's true in all parts of our lives.

Think about the political landscape in America today. One side is leading from the direction that we as a nation have to do some catch-up work when it comes to making America a fairer and more compassionate nation. That side is using government as the agent. The other side disagrees strongly and now has itching ears for all manner of newcomer candidates, often people with little if any leadership experience but who say things that the people want to hear.

It's just as true in the church. That's why the prosperity gospel is so popular. People like being told that God wants them to be rich and prosperous. It's a lot easier to swallow than hearing that story about how Christ gave everything, even his life, for us and that we are to do the same in response.

An alternative to translating the Greek as "itching" in this passage is to translate that same verb as "tickling." In other words, says one commentator, Timothy's flock likes to hear sermons, lessons and direction that "tickle their interest, rather than shape their will." They like their "thinking tickled with sweet nothings rather than their wills shaped to the image of Christ, so they are no longer willing to listen to the exposition of Biblical truth. On the other hand, they are always happy to hear how they can advance their

Christian walk by means of their own wisdom or effort, rather than by grace through faith.”¹

And, friends, God forbid that we think that we are above doing the same.

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So what’s a good Christian to do about the problem of itching ears – whether they are someone else’s ... or maybe, just maybe, our own?

Timothy’s mentor offers three points that stand the test of time.

First, remember what you know deep down to be true. “Continue in what you have learned,” the advice goes, “how from your childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through Christ Jesus.” (3:14-15)

In other words, locate in your mind and soul those eternal truths that reside in the most uncorrupted parts of yourselves – those pure Biblical truths about God’s love and Christ’s reconciling, open arms that you learned as a child. We’re reminded here why teaching Bible stories to our smallest children is so important, so formative to their young minds and hearts. The world and its false teachings have not gotten to them yet, even though it pounds on the door earlier and earlier in their little lives.

In the next few weeks, we as a congregation will be asked to help with this task of sharing the eternal truths of the Bible with our children. A new program of instruction will require that more of us embrace the privilege of participating in the faith formation of our kids. I hope many of you will say ‘yes’ to this invitation when it comes.

The second piece of advice to any willing evangelist that comes from this text strikes at the heart of the matter. “Don’t apologize for the Word,” the letter says. It says to “proclaim” the message, which means to announce it. In our day of religious diversity, we should not take that to mean “impose” the message on others, use it like a club. That is not the job of the evangelist. Nor is it to manipulate. Rather, in the words of today’s text, be firm, persistent, encouraging and patient.

Third and finally, trust in the message itself.

¹ ["Paul's Final Charge to Timothy,"](#) Rev. Bryan Findlayson, Lectionary Bible Studies and Sermons, Pumpkin Cottage Ministry Resources.

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful,” Timothy is told. More than a few arguments have focused on what that language means. Did God dictate the Bible word for word? Or did God work through God’s faithful servants to communicate the truth in Christ?

Peter Holmes, a Baptist minister in Canada, offers this commentary.

“The writer uses the phrase ‘inspired by God,’ literally ‘God-breathed.’ In the Genesis creation account, God breathes life into his word. We must not smother it. We have to let it breathe. It is the word of God, and it is not only inspired but inspiring – it can breathe new life into us.”²

In the business of sharing the good news of the gospel, do not be concerned about whether you are the perfect messenger. You are not. None of us is. The message of God in Christ is, however, perfect. Tell it, just as someone told it to you at one time, and let it do its work.

* * *

I close with a story that Eugene Peterson, the wonderful writer and Bible translator of *The Message*, told in his visit to Charlotte last week. He recalled the chapter from the *Book of Pooh* in which Pooh, Christopher Robin and the gang head off to discover the North Pole.

They trek through the woods for a ways until they come to a stream that crosses their path. One by one they cross over successfully but little Roo, poor little Roo, falls in. The merry band comes together to strategize. Pooh finds a long stick. Roo grabs hold and climbs out of the creek.

“Christopher Robin asks Pooh where he got the pole from, and Pooh says that he just found it, and Christopher Robin announces that it is not just a pole, it is the North Pole! ... Christopher Robin tells Eeyore that Pooh has very cleverly found the North Pole. Eeyore isn't overly impressed, as you might have expected, but he does say *“Well, anyhow - it didn't rain”*, which for Eeyore is verging on ecstasy.

The animals stick the North Pole into the ground, and Christopher Robin writes out a notice to remind others that it is the North Pole and that it was discovered by Pooh. And

² [Feasting on the Word](#), p. 185

then they all go home, Pooh feeling very proud of what he has achieved on this momentous day.”

This story reminds us of the magic of childhood. Christopher Robin, a young boy, is the brains of the operation, but he is a boy.

We adults, however, are likely to do the same thing. In our quest for God, we are always at risk of finding what we are looking for – or at least telling ourselves that – and, then, we declare our quest over. Usually we are not that far from home. Our itching ears stop itching, for the moment.

But the Gospel calls us to go further, to endure, to navigate the deceptions of our culture and remember deeply the truth of the love of God. As Eugene Peterson writes in his translation of the last line of today’s scripture:

“Through the Word, we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”³

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ The Message, p. 1647