

SERMON
“Itching Ears”
2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5
Sunday, October 16, 2016

John Ortberg, senior pastor at California’s Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in writing about speaking the truth while preaching says: “Imagine picking your car up from the shop after a routine tune-up and the technician says, ‘This car is in great shape. Clearly you have an automotive genius to take great care of your car.’

Later that day, your brakes don't work. You find out you were out of brake fluid. You could have died. You go back to the shop, and you say, ‘Why didn't you tell me?’

The technician replies, ‘Well, I didn't want you to feel bad. Plus, to be honest, I was afraid you might get upset with me. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted.’

You'd be furious! You'd say, ‘I didn't come here for a little fantasy-based ego boost! When it comes to my car, I want the truth.’

Or imagine going to the doctor's office for a checkup. The doctor says to you, ‘You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympian. You are to be congratulated.’

Later that day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. You find out later your arteries were so clogged that you were like one jelly doughnut away from the grim reaper.

You go back to the doctor and say, ‘Why didn't you tell me?’

The doctor says, ‘Well, I knew your body is in worse shape than the Pillsbury doughboy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get kind of offended. It's kind of bad for business. They don't come back. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted.’

You'd be furious! You'd say to the doctor, ‘When it comes to my body, I want the truth!’”

The Apostle Paul in his final words to Timothy, in fact in his last words ever recorded in the scriptures, is concerned with those who in the future will no longer put up with the truth, and having itching ears, will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. According to the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary itching ears is synonymous with a “*curiosity that can be relieved only by the scratching of spicy bits of information.*” Homiletics Magazine describes itching ears as a “*malignant, unsatisfied curiosity like that which killed the cat.*” And the Interpretation Commentary says those with itching ears are “*eager to be tickled with one new sensation after another, craving for the latest, wishing to be titillated with whatever is novel.*”

Regardless of how itchy one’s ears are, to turn away from the truth; that is to turn away from that what Paul throughout his letters to Timothy refers to as ‘sound doctrine;’ is to turn away from faith in Jesus Christ. Sound doctrine, as Paul defined it in his first letter to Timothy, is faith in Jesus Christ and having the love that is faith’s goal.

The late Ellsworth Kalas once wrote: “*Our Bible is not what one would expect a book of religious instruction should be. If you and I were preparing a book to bless and guide people's lives, we wouldn't include large portions of Numbers, Chronicles or Ezekiel. And we'd organize it differently. We have to acknowledge that this book has a style and a purpose of its own; and we confess that in a sense, it has succeeded in spite of itself. On the surface, it isn't the sort of book which looks like a bestseller. It's long, and there are many dull and difficult portions. And while there is a plot, you have to pay attention if you're to find it.*”

“But,” insist Kalas, “*the plot is well worth the read because the Bible tells the tale of a love affair between God and the human race.*”

When I was a teenager I vividly remember the moment when God’s love affair with the human race became more real for me. I was at a church summer camp. Immediately after checking in I was escorted out into the woods by a camp counselor and told to stand by a tree until I was told to return to the cabin.

The counselor then left.

Unbeknownst to me stereo speakers had been suspended from the trees throughout the woods. As I stood alone in the woods a voice began to speak. It was retelling the Creation story: “*In the beginning God*

created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.” As each of the seven days of Creation was being told I found myself enthralled with the beauty of the creation that surrounded me in the woods:

- the sunshine peaking through the canopy of green leaves,
- the ferns and flowers that adored the forest floor,
- the chirping birds flying from branch to branch
- and the chipmunks and squirrels scurrying across the ground.

Even though my parents and Sunday school teachers had taught me that I was loved by God; it wasn't until I was alone in the woods hearing what sounded to me like the voice of God Himself telling the story of Creation that I understood what it meant to be unconditionally loved. In that moment something new...something great... began forming in my heart. It didn't prevent me from having itching ears; but it did help me not to scratch the itch. The prescription (Paul calls it 'sound doctrine' or 'the truth' is this: God just doesn't love His creation; God believes His creation is worth dying for. Sadly, overcome by itching ears, there will be those within the church who will fall away; but Paul in his dying words to Timothy warns him not to be overcome by them; instead he encourages Timothy to “always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, and carry out your ministry fully.”

I have to admit there I have been times in my career that I have found myself tempted to chase after the things that cause my ears to itch. Just last week when the District Superintendent was here for our annual charge conference and informed me that he was rejecting my big pay raise of .08% because the church had not paid its apportionments in full I was ready to scream: “It's only \$398!”

But I didn't. Yes, I ran around for a few moments like a chicken with its head cut off, but what sustained me through that little ripple in my life was my faith. Now I realize that \$398 is nothing compared to the much bigger challenges in life; but as far as the Apostle Paul is concerned the same principle is at play. Regardless of what life throws our way; whether it is the death of a loved one, the diagnoses of cancer, the loss of a job or the authority of the Cabinet; what sustains us is not the itch in our ears but the faith we proclaim in Christ.

In a recent experiment, Japanese researchers tested 57 high-school boys for their sensitivity to allergens. The boys filled out questionnaires about past experiences with plants, including lacquer trees, which can cause itchy rashes much as poison oak and poison ivy do. Boys who reported having severe reactions to the poisonous trees were blindfolded. Researchers brushed one arm with leaves from a lacquer tree but told the boys they were chestnut tree leaves. The scientists stroked the other arm with chestnut tree leaves but said the foliage came from a lacquer tree. Within minutes the arm the boys believed to have been exposed to the poisonous tree began to react, turning red and developing a bumpy, itchy rash. In most cases the arm that had contact with the actual poison did not react.

I think this experiment shows how susceptible we are to the power of suggestion...the power of the itching ear. But what Paul tells Timothy is that no amount of scratching will satisfy the itch. The only thing that will stop the itch is a faith that is solely focused on the love of God as displayed upon the cross in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior.

William Barclay in his commentary on 2 Timothy says of the work of the believer: *“Our work must be such that it will stand the scrutiny of Christ. Our lives must be such that they will welcome the appearance of the King. Our service must be such that it will demonstrate the reality of our citizenship of the Kingdom of God.”* This is the work that Paul called Timothy to strive for and it is the calling that we too must strive for as well.