

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

Machias, Maine

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Do This

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Let us pray . . .

Listen again to the opening verse from our lesson this morning:

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.

In the hearing of the people.

A developing baby in utero can hear sounds at 18 weeks.

At 26 weeks they react to sound both inside and outside of their mother's body and can even be soothed by the sound of her voice.

Of course after a lifetime of hearing you might eventually find yourself saying “what?” or “pardon?” far more frequently than you care to and so begin to consider hearing aids as I do, because our hearing changes across our lifetimes.

Of course, not only hearing, but EVERYTHING changes across our lifetimes— there is nothing static about the things of God. Even God’s stories. For the longest time, the story Ken read for us was heard as an example of an outsider’s faith in Jesus’ ability to heal.

In recent years, this story — Matthew 8:5-13 is the other account —has received much attention for its gay-affirming interpretation which is gleaned in particular from two Greek words: The first is when the centurion calls his servant (en’-tee-mos) *entimos*. Which means honored or valued. It’s used in verse 2:

A centurion there had a slave whom he ([en’-tee-mos] entimos) valued highly

Depending on the context, *entimos* can also signify emotional closeness in a romantic partnership. It was common in Greco-Roman culture for mature men to pair up with a young man as his lover in a sexual practice called pederasty.

The other Greek word promoting a wider reading is (paheece) *pais* which means a young male servant. It's used in verse 7 when the centurion says:

But only speak the word, and let my ([paheece] pais) servant be healed.

Some biblical historians have noted that (paheece) *pais* was sometimes used in Ancient Greek texts as a label for the younger partner of a same-sex relationship, alongside expressions of love or desire. There is also literary evidence of homosexuality in the Roman military.

Adding to this pro-homoerotic reading is in the centurion's actions:

Having heard about Jesus, the centurion sends for him to heal his slave.

The argument is that it's unlikely that a soldier would have cared so

deeply about an ordinary slave. So, this closer reading has led to progressive Biblical scholars to conclude that the centurion was in a homosexual relationship with the “slave whom he valued highly.”

Scholar Isabella Green says this reading of the centurion and his servant completely subverts the hetero-centric framework of love and relationships in the Bible, and therefore ought to be central to the discussion of religion and sexuality.

Now like many a complicated love story, other scholars have noted that this story occurs within an imbalance of sexual power with the centurion taking on the role of an influential patron, while his lover is a younger, less powerful man relying on him like a client.

And while I’m in agreement with the pro-homoerotic views of this texts based on the evidence, there is of course a great difficulty in absorbing the likelihood that by today’s standards of acceptability in terms of consent, the (paheece) *pais* was a minor.

And furthermore, if Jesus is who we say he is, then surely he would not have ignored the imbalance of sexual power and healed a slave boy only for him to continue being at the mercy of the centurion?

These complications might be why a homoerotic reading of the text is dismissed because otherwise, we'd all have to walk with and be challenged by some incredibly uncomfortable and disturbing truths. So it's easier to read it through the eyes of what is acceptable to us, based on what we believe keeps us comfortable.

And yet — no matter how controversial, no matter how difficult — all the dynamics in this story were normal for first century Palestine. And at the end of the day, the point is that Jesus healed the centurion's slave. This is Luke's theology in action: There is no separation for who is acceptable to God and Jesus lives that point throughout Luke.

But, the point I want to make this morning is that there are always going to be places where we are separated with another. Where sacred texts

will clash within the hearing of the people, where many will decide who is acceptable and who is not when it comes to God — especially when it comes to issues of sexuality.

People — including me — use Scripture all the time to justify our beliefs or to create the other. As my brother Joe rightfully reminds me, I create the other when they don't agree with my views of God. So in the end, we don't get anywhere but apart. And in a little while, we'll share Holy Communion with the reminder to come together, to “do this” in remembrance of God's love for all.

So let's get back to our ears. The Greek word referenced for *hearing* is *akoé* (ak-o-ay') which means to hear spiritually, discerning God's voice. Now, hearing God's voice can be difficult because usually our own opinions are so much LOUDER and ripe with divisions.

Yet what our world needs are not more divisions, but more standing in the difficult tension of bearing opposing views.

Do this.

For all kinds of reasons, you're not always going to be able to engage another when it comes to disagreements: You might be blindsided by what someone says, the timing might be off, it might not be safe. Any number of reasons. But when and if you can, try to stay in the difficult place with someone having an opposing view.

Part of being a person of faith is bearing the hard work of being a power of example. Jesus did that hard work all the time, one story at a time, one conversation at a time. He embodied the things of God and because of that, for those who were willing to hear, he offered another way of being in the world.

And as usual, the ways of God are often upside down to how we think things should roll out. Staying with differing views doesn't mean having an excellent argument in the wings. Staying with differing views means starting with listening because as I heard it put: You're never going to

convince someone you're right by telling them over and over how wrong they are.

There are endless "how-tos" on the web when it comes to staying with a hard conversation, so I pulled some of the best tips for us to look at:

Since the first few steps in any contentious conversation should be about establishing trust, decency, and common ground, then for starters:

1. Don't assume bad intent. Assuming ill motives almost instantly cuts us off from truly understanding why someone does and believes as they do. We forget that just like us, they're a human being with a lifetime of experiences that shaped their mind. If we get stuck on that first wave of anger, then the conversation has a very hard time ever moving beyond it.

2. First Ask, Then Listen – Really Listen because a real conversation isn't about winners and losers. The point is to be present and that begins with actively listening. Active listening means listening to learn.

Active listening tells the other from the outset that you respect them, even if you don't agree with their opinion.

That's easy when you're in alignment with what you're hearing. But when you hear something that pushes your buttons, and every inner instinct is telling you to jump in with a counterargument, move closer by saying, "Tell me more." And then listen to the more they offer. Asking questions helps us map the disconnect between our differing points of view.

3. Find Shared Values. Listening allows you the chance to hear your common ground. And when you shed light on shared values and agree on things in the world which require change, suddenly you're both seeing the same side of the coin. Some might call that a miracle.

When you start to pull away from each other in the conversation, try returning to the shared values to diffuse the conflict and, which makes for a far more valuable discussion.

4. Instead of presenting your opinion as morally righteous — which is easy for UCCers to do with our justice-oriented hearts and wide understanding of the Holy — try to understand the morality in another’s opinion. While you may not agree with that morality, trying to understand what underpins someone else’s moral compass gives you a place to hold the conversation open.

5. Press gently and question ideas from what was shared as a way to advance your mutual understanding. There will be times when you and the person you’re speaking with have a fundamental clash of ideas. We all have things about which we feel very strongly, and there’s no doubt things can get tricky here.

Sometimes you have to agree to disagree or even walk away, but never forget to thank the other person for trying to help you understand. Jesus didn’t agree with being crucified — begged God to take the cup from him — but at the last supper? He gave thanks before breaking the bread.

Our nation is deeply polarized. Whether it's around LGBTQI+ issues, reproductive rights, Black Lives, minimum wage, climate change, gun safety — the divisions go on and on.

And maybe like me, the divisions are much closer to home and some of your personal relationships are also stuck in division.

Beloveds, as people of faith, we have to help do the work of healing the divides. And it starts with listening. Even Jesus first listened to the centurion. All healing begins with listening and that work starts one conversation at a time.

So this week, my prayer for you is twofold:

First that you find situations to practice these things. Start small and practice by engaging a friend or trusted family member or pastor with a differing view.

My second prayer is that the Holy puts some challenging views in each of our paths so that we may begin the Holy practice of listening.

Remember the point isn't to be right, Lord knows we have enough people who feel they are right — and often that is me.

The point is to do more healing — by doing more listening.

Do this.

Amen