

MEDITATIONS
JULY 3, 2005 SERMON
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Dear Lord, grant me a voice that speaks your word and grant us ears that listen for your word. Amen

Carolyn & I live in the Parkside Neighborhood where we take frequent trips to the nearby Buffalo Zoo. On a visit with my daughter, Mia, just after I had graduated from Veterinary school, we bumped into the now former Zoo Vet, Dr. Prouten. After a nice exchange of professional stories, Dr. Prouten asked; “Reed, could I ever call on you to fill in for me here, if I had to go out of town?” As a new grad, who focused on cats, dogs and the occasional hamster, the thought of this was mildly intriguing, but mostly terrifying. The vision of an elephant with a toothache looming over me while I scramble to consider what to do next jumped into my imagination.

That same feeling overcame me when Rev. Tom Yorty asked me if I could serve as your lay preacher today. What was I going to do with that elephant? – I wondered. The answer came simply. Tell my story. My journey of faith. How I came to be before you today. I will follow that with a lesson I have learned about listening for God’s word.

Some of you will have heard the beginning of this story so bear with me. As busy professionals with children, new back to Buffalo, church on Sunday morning was optional. We enjoyed it when we came but 2-3 out of 4 Sundays, there just seemed to be too much to do. Then Chuck Kreiner stood up one Stewardship Sunday, right over there, and told us what the church needed from us and why. As Carolyn and I looked at each other and we realized we had to quintuple our gift to the church just to meet the average need per family. We said to ourselves to do that we need to reallocate not only our money but also our time to, put it frankly, justify that expense. We started showing up most every Sunday. Our children got to Sunday school while we sat in on the Case Library series or Interior Life programs. We learned about the Power of Two – the marriage encounter program – signed up – and I can say – nothing has been better for our marriage.

For reasons still unknown to me, Bonnie Morton and Bill Gray asked me to serve as a Stewardship co-chair. Please let me say right now, I am not up here to talk about your gift to the church. No, quite the opposite, I am up here to talk about the church’s gift to me, God’s gift to me, and your gift to me. You see, through my role in Stewardship, I listened to the history of this church, and the visions for where this church is going. I spoke with members about their feelings for the church, their hopes and concerns. Why they are giving more, why they wish they could give more, why they are giving less. As difficult as it is to talk about money and gifts, it is even harder for us to talk about our faith. Stewardship gave me an entry point to engage with many of you and through that I learned about the depth of your commitment to this community of faith.

Through this work, through sharing your stories, your worries, your visions – you have deepened my belief that in this community we are doing God’s work and through this you have deepened my faith. And for that I thank you. You gave me this stole last week for these Stewardship efforts – it is green for the color of growth and new life. I wear it today as a symbol of the faith and new growth that you have given me.

In Stewardship there was a lesson I learned about listening for God’s word that I want to share with you.

For a few years I was lucky enough to live in Korea and Taiwan near my brother, Greg and his wife, Nancy. While walking through a Taiwanese market place one day I stopped to watch a calligrapher writing out scrolls. I was entranced by the broad brush strokes spelling out images that to me were incomprehensible. Fortunately, he had translations scrawled out in broken English. I picked out this one. I am told it means:

“The harder you work, the luckier you get”

While this applies to our worlds of work, and school; it can also apply to our relationship with God. Allow me to paraphrase:

“The harder you listen, the more you will hear God’s word”

“The harder you look, the more you will see God at work in your life”

| “He who has ears, let him hear” Jesus would say at the end of many parables.

You see ... All God asks is that we try.... to dedicate ourselves to the task laid before us and to do our best. If we listen and try to discern God’s message for us – it is all around us – God’s grace is all around us like the seeds that sower casts in Suzanne’s reading from the gospel of Matthew. How those seeds do depends on how fertile the soil is where they land, how prepared we are to receive the message. Have we done the work, have we labored and sweated, have we argued and debated? Have we tried ... to turn the soil, create a clear patch, to create a quiet place so we may listen and discern? Like any project – the work is 80% preparation and 20 % doing what you set out to do. Be it the family garden, cooking a good meal, or scraping & repainting old woodwork.

Allow me to give you an example from our Stewardship Committee meetings. We were and are a committee working together, sharing our concerns, wrestling with contrary opinions, listening to each other’s visions and ideas, trying to discern the best way to approach our community of faith. In one meeting, as we were discussing the theme for Stewardship 2005, we hit upon the idea that Stewardship is just another of the many ways that our church invites us to participate. Particularly powerful, as it was in my family’s case, that participating in Stewardship is a way you can transform your relationship with this community, with your faith and with God. Thus through this process came the theme of Stewardship as An Invitation to Transformation.

Now I can't tell you that this discernment would stand up to the pontiff's devil's advocate, who is currently reviewing the former pontiff's canonization, but I can tell you it was an inspiration born of work and quiet contemplation.

Back to the invitation – look today at the back of the bulletin – each and every entry there is an invitation for you to participate, look at the plans in place for Ferguson Avenue block, look at plans to re-create our “back of house” not as self congratulatory monument, but as a hard working, functional, missional focused facility prepared to provide space for the sweat equity of discerning God's purpose and quiet places to reflect on those experiences. You are invited in so many ways to put in that 80% of sweat equity struggle and 20 % of quiet discernment and through this process be transformed by God's grace. God has a role here for each of us.

I can hear you. You are thinking my life is so full; I have so much I have left undone, so much I have yet to do. How could I possibly do anything more? Here is a very simple ideas – turn off your car radio - this past week while preparing for today I turned off mine – and as I drove I thought about my message to you, jotting notes occasionally at red lights. It reminds me of my uncle, Chet Dann, who used to refuse our pleas as young children to turn on the radio. To that he would reply “I can't see with the radio on.” I laughed at that then, but now I realize he was right. We clutter up our lives, our ears and our eyes with so much. Simple steps like turning off your radio add up and give you more time to listen, see and discern God's message to you.

Back to the elephant - I never did fill in for Dr. Prouten at the Zoo but I did have a Native American boss once who told me when I faced this enormous project of estimating the cost of placing all the ironwork in one of our subway stations “If you are going to eat an elephant you have to start with the first bite.”

As our country's forefathers did, when faced with the insurmountable task of creating a new country out of 13 disparate colonies, just get started and try. Dedicate yourself and do... Do something and do it the best you possibly can. Try your hardest and good will come of it.

If I may, I would like to close with a prayer;

Dear Lord, like seeds to a garden, Your grace, falls down around us everyday in ways we do not see. Our soil has not been turned, we are not prepared, and we do not listen. Call us to your tasks, give us labors that we may see, clear a quiet place that we may listen and discern that we may do your work in this church and in this community. AMEN

THE CHARGE

Go now! out into this Glorious day the Lord hath made, open yourself to where God is calling you, latch onto that idea, struggle, wrestle, sweat, try your best and then create a quiet moment to discern God's message for you.

May the grace of the Lord and Love of Jesus Christ be with you now and in the week ahead. AMEN