

“Crickets and Coins”

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She that hath ears to hear, let her hear.

Welcome to October! This month’s Soul Matters worship theme is **deep listening**, and my job today is to introduce it to you. For starters, we will be using this stethoscope [hold up stethoscope] as a visual representation of our theme. Look for it at services throughout the month!

And now, the promised introduction: Congregation [gesture towards the congregation], meet deep listening [gesture towards the stethoscope]. [Do the gestures again in reverse:] Deep listening, meet the congregation. Well, as I said, this was my job for the day, so– thanks for coming and I’ll see you next week! [pretend to pack up].

Okay. That was silly. Thank you for humoring me. Let us proceed with a *real* and *proper* introduction. A natural way to introduce our theme of deep listening would be to delve into the question “What is deep listening?” I could define and draw distinctions between the terms “hearing”, “listening”, “deeply listening”; I could talk about the many ways to engage in the spiritual practice of deep listening: listening to nature, listening to each other, listening to God, etc., etc., etc... I could... It’s fertile ground, after all, but – I’m not. I will touch on such themes this morning, but for the most part I’m going to leave that for Reverend Jane and the rest of the month. Today, I want to go a bit “meta” on you.

I’m going to ask us to think hard about *what* we *choose* to listen to. And not just with our ears. To emphasize this point I couldn’t resist using one of my favorite bits from Shakespeare’s comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. These few lines of Nick Bottom’s short monologue, as ludicrous as they are, remind me that we ingest the world through *all* of our senses. In our daily lives we are subjected to so much input: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, voices, opinions, etc., etc., etc., and up against this deluge of information we have these words of Reverend Scott Tayler’s from our prayer this morning, “who we listen to, is who we become; What we listen for, determines our path”. What an excellent starting point for my next bit.

But before I go there, I feel it is my duty to tell you all the places I’m going this morning, to give you a roadmap of what is to come. So, first, I’ll consider deep listening during the Jewish High Holidays. Next, I’ll complain about this morning’s Story for All Ages. And to finish up, I’ll generalize the story enough so that I can make my peace with it and move on – Jesus will help.

“Who we listen to, is who we become.” I say that’s good stuff. It “hits”, as the young people say. Let’s give it a test drive right now in the context of the Jewish High Holidays, which started last Thursday at sundown with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and will end on Saturday at sundown with the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The High Holidays are ten days set aside from the usual busyness of the year for self-examination, for repenting for one’s sins, and for seeking out closeness with God.

One tradition during the High Holidays is to seek out and ask forgiveness of those you have wronged, and I say that this is an exercise in deep listening to God. God – there’s that word, “God”. Time for a little sidebar.

The word “God” is, no doubt, controversial, and for some, even triggering, especially in a Unitarian Universalist Church. As stated in our Vision, at Channing Memorial Church, we embrace our Jewish and Christian roots, and, as such, we often use the “G”-word, and we use it in many ways. One way which I am particularly fond of is to use it as an invocation of something more specific. I learned this liturgical device from our Minister Emeritus, Reverend Susan LaMar, but I suspect it has more history. By using the language “God as X”, it deifies X in a worshipful way. Don’t worry, there will be some more concrete examples coming up soon. Let us get back to forgiveness.

Asking for and granting forgiveness requires deep listening. To approach someone you have wronged and ask for forgiveness requires you to humbly, and without any defense, acknowledge the harm you have caused. You must deeply listen to God as your conscience, to God as your best self.

And to properly forgive someone who has wronged you requires you to listen to them with an open, vulnerable heart and it also requires you to let go of that hurt and to stop listening to the cacophony of your fear. You must deeply listen to God as your love of life, to God as the spirit of your resilience.

Forgiveness. When it is done with deep listening, the wronger and the wronged become God to one another. And the picture of an entire community going about their days asking for and giving forgiveness to one another is beautiful to me: a community of God. “Who we listen to, is who we become.”

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

When I was preparing this worship service, looking at the stories suggested by the Soul Matters packet, “The Cricket and the Coin”, stood out to me. Because I found it annoying. Something about it really irked me. What was the problem?

It is a good length, it fits the theme of deep listening, it packs a little punch. Indeed, we tend to hear and enjoy hearing what we are used to hearing, be it crickets or coins. I couldn’t put my finger on what was bothering me, and I was sorely tempted to dismiss it and look for another story. But I sat with it for a while. And then I went in search of another retelling of the story in hopes it would possibly annoy me less, or at least help me figure out why it bothered me so. I found two other versions: one was outright offensive in its use of racist language with respect to Native Americans; the other was folksy and friendly, and well-told, but by the time I was half-way through it I knew what at least part of my problem was: the city versus country narrative.

The story paints city folk as busy, greedy, selfish, nature-ignoring snobs, and it paints country folk as wise, nature-loving, appreciative of life, and humble. It paints country folk as somehow closer to God. This is not a new narrative by any means, but I don’t find it helpful, and I don’t think it is fair. In my view, God, however invoked, is *everywhere*.

So there’s that; but the more interesting problem I have with the story, and it took even more time for me to figure this out, is with its portrayal of the coin as a symbol of evil.

They who hath ears to hear, let them hear.

17 Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?

18 But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?

19 Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.

20 And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription

21 They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

The coin in today's story for all ages reminded me of this passage from the Book of Matthew. In the "Cricket and the Coin", the coin is a symbol of Greed, with a capital "G", one of the seven deadly sins. What is the coin a symbol of in these words of Jesus? Greed? Well, I suppose it could, but I don't think that captures the gist at all. It doesn't really make sense to "render Greed to the Greedy".

I view the coin, and, more contextually, the act of paying taxes, as *survival*. To "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" is to "do what you have to do in order to survive". Moreover, to "render unto God the things that are God's" is to *live*, not just survive.

Indeed, mere survival is not living in any meaningful sense of the word. Coming to Church reminds me of this. And yet, it is a truism that in order to live, one must survive. I recently spent a lovely half an hour communing with nature under a ponderosa pine tree. But I ate my lunch afterwards.

And there are other bits from the Bible that can be viewed this way. For your homework, consider the story of Cain and Abel and their sacrifices. Spoiler alert: Cain is the coin, and Abel is the cricket.

And so for me, cricket and the coin is not about God as Nature versus Evil as Greed, but rather it is about surviving while listening deeply to God, so that we may live. Sometimes, we must listen to the cricket; sometimes, we must listen to the coin: to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.

We who have ears to hear, let us hear.

Amen.