

Sermon Delivered at Christ Lutheran Church
June 7, 2009 + The Feast of the Holy Trinity
The Rev. Gerald Patrick Coleman, Director of Music

The Illusion of Ownership

Page | 1

We live in a noisy world. Silence is a rare commodity. We are surrounded by so much noise that we have learned to tune much of it out. It's a survival skill. Without it we couldn't cope.

Try an experiment sometime. Two minutes is all it will take. It works best when you're home alone. First, turn off the TV off, or the radio, or the stereo, or whatever it is you use for auditory wall-paper. Then sit in a comfortable chair and listen. Really listen. Now hear the sounds and distinguish them from one another. First you'll hear obvious things, like the traffic outside or kids playing. Tune it out. At our house you can hear the Metro speed by. Tune it out (Trust me: you can learn to tune this out). Then you'll hear the symphony of birds and insects, or the comforting sound of the dog snoring in the next room. Tune it out. If you have forced-air heating or air-conditioning, you can hear it when it comes on; sometimes you can hear the furnace initiate it. Tune that out, too. Keep listening and you'll soon be able to hear the hum of your refrigerator. Tune it out. Sometimes you can hear the sound of your breathing or your heart beating—miraculous sounds indeed, if you really focus on them and ponder them. But the point is you won't hear them naturally. You'll have to work at it.

It often amazes me that God wants to speak to me: it would seem God has better things to do. Every time I read chapter three of John's Gospel, it strikes me that Jesus is calling for the heart of Nicodemus, trying to get him to listen. Nicodemus is drawn to seek Jesus at night: who knows why? But I will tell you this: when darkness comes and we lose our ability to see, we pay a lot more attention to sounds. Anyway, you know the narrative. Under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus finds Jesus and asks him a question disguised as a declaration. "Rabbi," he says, "we know that you are teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus replies "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Then Nicodemus reverses his rhetorical tack and makes two declarations, each disguised as a question: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Then Jesus tells it like it really is. "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit of God."

I have always loved this image of the wind blowing where it wants to, and Nicodemus hearing the sound of it without knowing where it comes from or where it goes. And then Jesus adds this amazing thought: “that’s just how it is with people born of the Spirit of God, people like you, Nicodemus.”

Like the Hebrew language, Greek has only one word that is used for the three English words wind, breath, and Spirit. So I think Jesus is possibly asking Nicodemus to do three things. First he is asking him to slow down long enough to hear the sound of his own breath. Then he is asking Nicodemus to listen to the wind blow. But most importantly, Jesus is asking Nicodemus to listen to the Spirit... to the Spirit of God.

Now, I’d like to pause for a moment and make my own personal confession. Do bear with me. I’m not looking for absolution: it’s just that I’ll feel better after I say this. If anyone asks me to take part in a church renovation ever again, I will immediately drive up I-95 and hurl myself from the George Washington Bridge into the Hudson River. This renovation has been painful. Let me begin mid-story, because in truth, the renovation project began long before I arrived. Some of you can tell stories more painful than mine, but not now, because I have the microphone. One day I was informed that the renovation would require that the church office be relocated to share the space known as the choir room. Being, I think, a pretty good team player, I said, “OK. Let’s go look at the space and imagine how this is going to work.” So down we all went, and in a very short order we worked it all out. Imagine something like the following conversation, (speakers unidentified to protect the innocent):

The secretary’s desk will go here. The copy machine will go here. Then we will bring in two filing cabinets. Do you think we can squeeze them in that space? Sure. Easy enough. We can live with that.

Someone has said, “if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” And then came the Saturday appointed for moving furniture. The above items were moved as described, but they were not the only things to find a home in the choir room. No, there were surprises. There were bookcases and a paper cutter and boxes--lots and lots of boxes. A little overwhelming. In the hills of southern Virginia where my beautiful mother grew up, there is a saying about pests. We heard it many times growing up. The saying is this: if you see a snake in your house, you can assume he brought his family with him. This was said about mice, insects, and other various pests, but the prophetic metaphorical truth to be inferred was that a pest would always be followed by pestilence. And so it was. The choir room became home to more than we “planned.”

Now I want to say some words about my sister in Christ, Karen Christian. I want to say them delicately, because I love her dearly, and on more than one occasion she has saved my backside. Let me put it this way: if you look up the word multi-tasker in a dictionary, you will see a picture of Karen. Working at the speed of summer lightening, she can do ten things at once, some of them requiring her to yell to a totally different part of the building while

simultaneously speaking to someone on the phone. I realize that I sound like Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. Guilty as charged. But you cannot imagine the stress.

And then, because we were without heat except in the choir room, we were soon joined by Vicar Susan. "Oh, it'll just be one little table right here. Do you think that would work?" What could I say? She is an important member of the team and she deserved to be in a room that was heated, even if poorly.

In time the place came to resemble a workroom in one of those turn-of-the-century manufacturing buildings that filled the American industrial cities. And I haven't even mentioned the persistent saw-dust, the chemicals, the noise. Noises I'd never heard before. And I was, to put it mildly, frustrated.

Now I am not proud of any of this. I told you: this is my confession. In the midst of a winter day, I sought and found a quiet refuge, and I heard the sound of my own breathing. I was in such a quiet place that my breathing sounded like the percussion section of the New York Philharmonic. I also heard the voice of God say, "Listen to the wind, Gerry. Listen to the wind." It brought me up short and gave me great pause. I felt a little like Jonah finding shade under the broom tree, until God caused it to wither and die. And then, like Jonah, I was mad. Really mad. But God wouldn't leave me alone. "Listen to the wind," God said. No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

That's when it came to me: ownership is an illusion. Ownership is the American way. But it is not God's way, and it is not the Kingdom way. Barbara Brown Taylor has written an insightful sermon entitled "God's Sharecroppers." Thinking about it reminds me that despite our file drawers full of deeds and titles and mortgage documents, we are not owners, but sharecroppers. God's sharecroppers live on his land by grace, and all they have to do is give him back a little of the harvest. And if I may be so bold as to ask this, "What makes us think ten percent is enough?" Maybe ten percent is too much. Maybe it's too little. I don't know. I suppose it depends on how one has been blessed. I'm not convinced that the Bible is as focused on the numbers as our teaching about tithing might suggest. The bible is focused on generosity, and it seems clear to me that the God who sent his Son to make his home with us, and gave him up completely, is a God who gives without thinking about the cost. He is not a 10 percent God or a 90 percent God. He gives, and gives, and gives. This God always keeps the porch light on, opens the door and greets us with an embrace, because wherever he is, that is our home. But not by deeds and titles and mortgages--but by water and word, by bread and wine, and by the dazzling irreversible fact of indiscriminate, self-annihilating love. One time Jesus said, "Anyone who comes to me will never be turned away." What a large and large-hearted promise!

God knows that we own nothing. He's not impressed with our deeds and titles. The painful truth is that none of it is ours. It's all God's. Every bit of it. "The earth is the Lord's," says Psalm 8. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Do we believe that? Do we believe that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it? Apart from God we are nothing and we have

nothing. But, here we are, living on God's land. In God's house. This is really worthy of our reflection and our thoughtful response in a time when so many people are losing their homes, and many are rapidly becoming what we call homeless. The Bible has no word for homeless: such a thing never appeared in the vision of the world which our gracious God imagined. So how has this tragic situation come to be? That is a naked question with no pretensions. It's not a question disguised as a political or economic theory. It is a simple and painful question about God's dreams for the world, and I don't have any answers. But the question lingers with me. You too? Listen to the wind.

I learned a very important lesson during the renovation: the choir room does not belong to me. It never did. In the world of deeds and titles and mortgages, it belongs to this congregation, and the congregation may do with it as it wishes. But in the Kingdom of God, it belongs to God, because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. I wonder what would happen if we stopped to imagine ways it could be surrendered back to God for the life of the world. This is another naked question without pretension. But it captivates me. It makes me listen to the wind.

Which brings me to the climax of this humble arc of thought shared with you this morning. We have very nearly finished the renovation, and I should like to ask you about possession of it. In the legal world, it is the property of this congregation. But in the Kingdom of God, it is God's. And now that the noise is subsiding we need to search our hearts and determine which of those is most important, because they can represent widely divergent realities. To help with that process of discernment, I would suggest this exercise. Someday when you have time, walk through this building, every room of it. As you come to each space, try to imagine how God could use that particular space for his own purposes. As you make your pilgrimage through the building, pause, find silence, reflect, pray, and imagine. Ask God to show you his imagination for the use of the space, and listen to the wind. I'm positive that we haven't even come close to God's vision for making this space serve the world. Can we come to the silent place where we can see the miracles God is just waiting to do for his creation? Sometimes you can hear the voice of God and hear God's unspoken dreams. But this is a hard thing for us to do—in our world of deeds and titles and mortgages, in a city where ownership is such a powerful concept, and in a country which is trembling with fear as it sees its economy in distress, a country which is fretting because its influence in the world is waning.

I don't know what to do about all of this, and many of you know much more about it than I do. But I have a suggestion as to how we start. We start by thanking God for this building we have, "such as it is and such as it may become," if I may borrow from Frost. Then we probably ought to get on our knees and admit that we don't really know how to use this building. As long as we think we know how to use it, we may be closed to the dreams God is ready to reveal. So let's tune out the noise of the world and seek the quiet place where God can plant his will in our imagination. Then we will see what God's sharecroppers can do. And my guess is that it will be dazzling in its capacity to heal the world with the brokenness of God.

"You must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born

of the Spirit of God.” That’s how you get from wherever you are to the Kingdom of God, and Jesus has promised never to turn anyone away.

Listen. Listen to the wind.