



**June 29, 2008**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

**“We can’t hear God with our fingers in our ears”**

When our children were small, they often covered their ears. One daughter always had a fear of loud noises. At four months of age she screamed if I ran the vacuum. At two, watching a fireworks display terrified her. At three, she still had to be held during thunderstorms.

But ALL of our children covered their ears when they didn’t want to hear what someone was saying. Do you remember when another kid was teasing you, how you’d cover your ears and say “Lalalalalala” really loud over and over again, stopping occasionally to say, “I can’t HEAR you!”

Even as adults, there are times we do what is called “selective listening”. There are things we want to hear, and things we don’t want to hear. We develop ways to tune out and tune in according to our desires. This actually can be helpful during long car trips with numerous children together in the vehicle. But sometimes, especially when it comes to our spiritual lives, it works against us.

God talks to us all the time. How often do we receive his messages? A lot of the time we have our fingers in our ears. We can’t hear God with our fingers in our ears!

What kinds of things is God saying? Our Scripture today gives us an example.

Jesus had selected seventy people to send out “two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.” They were to bring a message to each of these places. What was it? Right! “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” “The kingdom of God is near.”

Be careful! Several things are crucially important in this message. Jesus came to proclaim that the kingdom of God IS near us--wherever we may be found. Jesus came to proclaim this, and Jesus sent his twelve disciples to proclaim it, and then he sent the seventy other followers to proclaim it. Notice that he did not instruct them to say, "The kingdom of God is COMING" or "the kingdom of God will be arriving soon." He sent them to say "The Kingdom of God IS near."

This message is linked with Jesus' great commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself". Throughout his ministry Jesus illustrated the kingdom that has come near. He illustrated it through stories he told of God's amazing grace, of the lost being searched for, and then found. He illustrated the kingdom by his own actions, through healing the sick, restoring life to the dead, reconciling broken relationships, banishing demons. He practiced what he preached, LOVING OTHERS AS HIMSELF. He lived the kingdom. This is what these Bible passages teach us: You will recognize God's kingdom by this sign: Where love for neighbor is manifested, THERE is God's kingdom.

Friends, the kingdom of God is near us. That's what Jesus is telling US in our day, just as he sent the message out so long ago. Are we listening? Think back over the past several weeks. When and where did you hear Jesus speaking those words? When and where did you see love for neighbors? Did you hear God speaking to you? We may, if we think about it for a while, be able to identify some "kingdom message moments" over recent days and weeks. But my hunch is that a lot of our minutes and hours and days were spent holding our fingers in our ears.

What prevents us from seeing the kingdom of God, and letting it into our lives?

For many of us today, we are too darned busy. We don't SEE much of God's activity; we don't hear much of what God's saying. It's as though we are riding on one of those superfast trains, like the TGV (trains a grandes vitesses) trains in France. There is just no way to study the territory you are passing through. The tasks that make up our days encourage us to keep our heads down and our eyes focused on our daily agendas and blackberries, on their lists of "things to do today". Our fingers are stuck firmly in our ears.

I'm going to make a plug here for exercise-- especially outdoors. If you get outside, even to just walk, you'll see and hear things that busyness hides. I have been doing some biking and walking, running and swimming to prepare for a sprint distance triathlon I am doing in two weeks, in Wisconsin. There are five other women from our church participating this year! I am not going to break any records; I may need to walk a good portion of the running phase of the race. If I finish in less than 2 hours I will be very happy. But I have noticed something.

When I am walking, running or biking, I observe great things. I saw a dad pulling his two kids in a wagon loaded with towels and swimming gear heading down to the pool. I found myself wondering if he works nights, or perhaps is between jobs, in order to have the time to do that. But it was a joy to see. He was so full of happiness to be spending that time with his son and daughter, it just shone out around him. Love was happening.

I found myself thinking about the pure moments of summertime love in my life.

Going to Dairy Queen with my parents and brother for nickel cones. (It was a long time back!)

Family reunions where my one great aunt always served blue cheese just for me.

Camping trips with my husband and children.

Love. The purpose of life. What we are here for. To give and receive. Love. The kingdom of God bursting out all over. Love. That which you can always give no matter what—age, illness, job loss, imprisonment—nothing can take away our freedom and power to love others as ourselves. Pay attention! God is telling you all the time: “The kingdom of God is HERE” Look. Listen. It’s true.

Some of us may not relate to being busy, however. Some of us may be bored; time weighs heavily on our hands. Life may feel empty, and our energy levels sink lower day by day. Moving feels like pushing a five ton boulder uphill. We are deaf to God’s voice in this situation, too. We are holding our fingers in our ears if we accept it. If this is our struggle, a first step could be getting a thorough checkup with a doctor. We might need help getting started with an exercise program or a diet; or even taking some anti-depressant medications. If you feel too miserable to see or hear any signs of God’s kingdom, even if you consciously look for them, do not tarry! Get some advice and help from a trained professional. Ask two or three people to pray for you. These steps are essential parts of the process of GETTING THOSE FINGERS OUT OF OUR EARS! Love your neighbor as YOURSELF. When you do that, others will see your actions and THEY will see that the Kingdom of God is near in YOUR situation.

Another factor that contributes to a “fingers in the ears” lifestyle is what we often call EGO. Ken Blanchard says EGO is an acronym for “Edging God Out”. Sometimes we let the kingdom pass us by, because its simple greatness threatens our own sense of self-importance. Notice in our gospel lesson how the seventy returned to Jesus exulting in the fact that “even the demons submit to us”. Actually, the demons submitted to the power of Christ, represented by his messengers. Jesus tactfully acknowledged and celebrated with them the miracles accomplished, but carefully reminded them that his power was responsible.

Human history is full of stories where ego makes people blind and deaf. A newspaper editor in Harrisburg, 35 miles from Gettysburg, heard Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address". He wrote in his paper the next day: "We pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation, we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they should no more be repeated or thought of." The Emperor Ferdinand of Austria, after the first performance of "The Marriage of Figaro", turned to the composer and said, "Far too noisy, my dear Mozart. Far too many notes."

I read of a teacher in a private school in England, who explained how he viewed his young pupils. "I treat them with respect, because I know I am teaching future leaders, prime ministers, and presidents." How often do we see the greatness that God would have us spot, nourish, protect, and treasure?

Rigidity is another factor that contributes to "fingers in the ears". The kingdom doesn't always play by the rules we recognize. Jesus taught his followers to relax their dietary laws in order to extend God's good news to all. He told them how to deal with people who reject his message: "Shake the dust off your feet; but be sure you tell them the kingdom of God is near anyway."

Our rigidity makes it hard to accept those who think differently, who see things differently. But we MUST be open to differences in order to hear God's voice and perceive God's kingdom. James Harnish writes about a verse from Matthew 13: *Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a net." And he wasn't talking about just any old fishing net; he named a very specific kind of net. In fact, this is the only place in the entire New Testament that this particular word is used. The Greek word, "sagene", is better known to gulf fisherman as a seine. A seine is a very large net with weights on the bottom and floats on the top which is dragged between two, sometimes three boats. It's a huge dragnet which picks up everything in its path.*

Harnish checked all of this out with a member of his congregation in Florida, a commercial fisherman. He confirmed that seine nets are illegal inside the seven-mile limit, and there is a move on to ban them in the entire Gulf of Mexico. Harnish continues: *There's a good reason. A seine, a dragnet, is totally indiscriminate. It picks up everything in its path; not just the tuna you were trying to catch, but dolphins, seaweed, old life preservers, and the beer can that jerk in the boat next to you threw overboard last week. And that's exactly the point of Jesus parable. God's dragnet, the seine of the kingdom, gathers up everything. And that means everything. In fact, the word "fish" never appears in the original*

*language. The old King James translation was literally correct when it said, “gathered of every kind.”*

“The kingdom of God,” Jesus said, “is like a gigantic dragnet, which gathers everything together under the . . .reign of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. God’s dragnet gathers all things: good things, true things, beautiful things, but it also gathers up broken things, ugly things, painful things, the leftover rubbish of our human failures and sins- and in ways which go beyond our comprehension, draws them under the influence of God in Jesus Christ. There is no thing of any kind in your life and mine which cannot be gathered into the loving reign, the gracious authority, the redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ.

God is not a God of rigidity. God moves in mysterious ways, in a multitude of ways. As we recognize this, we will see the kingdom, and let it into our lives, more often and more fully. Busyness, boredom, despondency, ego, fear, and discomfort with the unknown, all these make us blind and deaf to messages of God’s kingdom of love, near to us and around us all the time.

I’d like to close with a humorous story, which might serve as a challenge to us, to get those fingers out of our ears.

In a “Peanuts” comic strip, Lucy and her brother Linus have just finished a chicken dinner, and Lucy is explaining to Linus how to make a wish on the wishbone: “This is a wishbone, Linus,” she says. “We both make our wishes and then pull it apart. Whoever breaks off the biggest part gets his wish.” Lucy begins the wishing: “Let’s see now. I wish for a new doll, a new bicycle, four new sweaters, some new saddle shoes, a wristwatch and about one hundred dollars.” Then Linus gets his turn: “I wish for long life for all my friends. I wish for peace in the world. I wish for great advancements in the fields of science and medicine, and. . . .” But by this time, Lucy is throwing away the unbroken wishbone in disgust, grumbling, “You seem to have a knack for spoiling everything.”

Love your neighbor as yourself. It’s happening in little boys who wish for peace in the world, and medical advancements. It’s happening, God says. Listen to me, it’s happening. The kingdom of God is near. Can you see it? Show others what you see. Then live in it. Live in my kingdom. Follow my ways. This is the purpose of your life. May it be so. Amen. Amen.