

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Accurate Reception"
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5th Sunday after Epiphany

Today is Super Sunday and millions of people will be watching the football game. I wasn't much of a football player in High School or before then. I think I could have been quite an athlete, but we had to choose between athletics and music. I chose to play alto sax in the band rather than get beat up on the High School football team. However, I did know something of the game plan in football. I knew a lot of it had to do with reception.

On offense, you had to understand the codes to the plays that were generally either runs or passes. You needed to understand and retain your part in the play. I enjoyed playing the end position, which whether tight end or not, meant you might receive a pass from the quarterback. And if you did, it all depended on you catching the ball. It was about accurate reception, plus running as far as you could with what room you had.

Then I realized a lot of things in life require accurate reception. Broadcasting is one. In order to get the game on either television or radio, you have to make sure you tune into the right channel. If you don't then you will either get video fuzz or audio white noise. Of course, most people receive their television and radio through cable which means that the cable company determines how many hundred channels you get, and all you have to do is remember the numbers, which is getting increasingly difficult with age, for me at least.

Reception is also a key feature in wireless internet and cell phones. If you hit a spot in the house or in the community that is weak, you won't be able to do your email, or receive or send your telephone call. Reception is the key to communication.

The problem is that many of us do not know how to receive. We don't know how to receive gifts, for example. I know some people who are unable to receive a gift without giving one back. Of course, this cycle can go on and on if you let it. But it is hard for many of us to simply receive a gift.

Many will say they do not accept charity. They will explain that this will hurt their pride or self image. Others say the opposite, constantly asking for help with money, or groceries while not being able to change their life style into one which gets them out of the cycle of poverty and addiction.

Receiving from others is a difficult subject to address. It gets at how well or how poorly we handle our neediness and dependence on others. It gets at our pride, which was the devil's sin and possibly the reason why he wanted God's job. He thought he could do better than God. Sometimes we think the same thing. Not that we would consciously admit that we know better than God, but rather we just have a hard time being told something by an authority. This might go back to one or other of our parents or teachers or police. Now it is about God.

And I realize how hard it is to make sure we are listening to the right authorities in our lives. When it comes to God, it is hard to know how to rightly understand the Bible when we read it. For others, it is even a choice to know which god to listen to, let alone the book or writings which has been broadcast for that purpose.

But if we choose to say "yes" to the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ, we choose to receive. And in order to receive, we must choose to listen. In order to listen, we must focus on that voice and be able to discern that voice as distinct from the other voices that want to crush us and do us harm. The Author of Life does not want to do us harm, although many challenges come our way.

The question is: Are we willing to receive it or not? If we are not, then we need not worry about the quality of reception nor the quality of the broadcast, because we have "tuned out." Have you tuned out lately?

I believe we need to do what both Isaiah and Paul did. They chose to receive. Isaiah found himself in the Lord's presence where strange creatures lived. They had two wings for hovering but also had two more pairs that shielded them from the intense power and presence of God, both their face and eyes and ears that receive information and their feet which would allow them to move around in life, and choose to where to go and where to land.

They have a saying, or perhaps it is a song, where they are in the presence of God. That saying is Holy, Holy, Holy. We've sung it several different ways

this morning. Holy means “set apart.” Saying something three times over in Hebrew intensifies the meaning. So when we say or sing “Holy, holy, holy,” it means we are treating God as the most “other” person in existence, the most unlike me, both fascinating yet terrifying at the same time. But there is more in this cry, because there is so much more to God. Even though God is so much more different than us, God is full of love and longing for each of us and establishing relationship with each of us has been a life long project for God. The difficulty has been our choice to not receive from God.

This was what Isaiah noticed immediately in God's presence. First of course, he noticed God, then he noticed what the seraphim were doing and saying, then he noticed what he was like. He noticed how sinful he was. Specifically he noticed that he was unclean in his mouth, which was not about oral hygiene but rather about the way he spoke. He recognized himself as foul mouthed, unable to be holy, true, pure, or good. These were the attributes that were preventing him from receiving from God. So everything stopped right there. He was unable to enjoy God's presence, unable to feel that it is right for him to be there. He was unable to enjoy relationship with God. And even though he did not articulate this, God knew. God sent one of the strange seraphim to help him, to deal specifically with the sin that was hindering him from receiving from God and also from agreeing with God's purposes for his life. He touched Isaiah's mouth with a live coal, burning away the sin but enabling Isaiah to speak rightly and to say what is holy, true, pure and good.

Once God had settled Isaiah's sin problem, then God could ask “Who will go for us and whom shall we send?” And Isaiah could answer, “Here I am, Lord, send me.” This is the crucial question for us all. For it is not just the ancient missionary or prophet that gets asked this question, we all get asked this question. Who is willing to receive from God? Who will spend their lives representing God, introducing others to God? God waits for an answer from some of us for our whole lives. Now that is patience. He waits for the simple “yes” that changes our lives forever, that changes our complete understanding of life, when we mean it, when we meditate on it, when we begin to take in the Holy, Holy, Holy, the quintessential call to worship that we sing in so many different ways.

I hope you will decide again today to say “yes” to God. It is the ultimate decision. It is the way to receive. God can take care of whatever sins are separating you from Himself. But I believe we have to want to receive.

There is grace to receive. Just as Paul said he was especially sought out by God through Jesus, so too he summarized what we have received: that Jesus did die for us, was raised, paid the price of sins so we wouldn't have to pay that price, took the coal from the altar and changed our hearts, not only our lips. And there were many witnesses to the fact that Jesus rose and told the truth. It was not just Paul. So it is up to us to choose to receive or not.

The football game depends on receiving the ball, for those in it. The game depends on receiving the signal, if you want to watch it. The faith is the same way. We need to receive it before we can believe it. So much about what happens here is about reception and agreement. But that's a sermon for another time.

Let us pray.