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## Itching Ears

a sermon on 2 Timothy 3.14–4.5

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Do you like to read stories by Flannery O'Connor? She was a great writer but her stories, especially her bizarre characters, are so odd that I worry about people who are big fans. And ... I consider myself a big fan.

Her characters tend to wrestle with issues of faith, and this is true of her novel *Wise Blood*. In it a man named Hazel Motes tries to start a church based on *not* believing. He calls it "the Church without Christ." He describes it as "the church peaceful and satisfied." He says at one point, while he's preaching from the hood of his car: "I believe in a new kind of Jesus...one that can't waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he's all man and ain't got any God in him."

Hazel Motes is relevant to our scripture reading in two ways. When Paul writes about itching ears and teachers who tell people what they want to hear, I think of Motes doing just that. He's an ignorant hick, but he manages to preach a fresh, contemporary message by reviving ancient heresies. I'll say more about this later. The other reason I think of Motes is his obsession with his car.

In the novel, he buys this beat up old car that's falling apart. The starter doesn't work right. The gas tank leaks. The radiator leaks. The tires are bad. Nothing on this car works right. Yet he is convinced it is a good car. Motes loves his car, and every time something goes wrong with it, he presses on people that it is "a good car." He even judges the quality of mechanics based on whether they agree with him. Here's a fun quote:

Haze had driven his car immediately to the nearest garage where a man with black bangs and a short expressionless face had come out to wait on him. He told the man he wanted the horn made to blow and the leaks taken out of the gas tank, the starter made to work smoother and the windshield wipers tightened.

The man lifted the hood and glanced inside and then shut it again. Then he walked around the car, stopping to lean over it here and there, and thumping it in one place and another. Haze asked him how long it would take to put it in the best order.

"It can't be done," the man said.

"This is a good car," Haze said. "I knew it when I first saw it that it was the car for me, and since I've had it, I've had a place to be that I can always get away in."

"Was you going someplace in this?" the man asked.

"To another garage," Haze said, and he got in the Essex and drove off. At the other garage he went to, there was a man who said he could put the car in the best shape overnight, because it was such a good car to begin with, so well put together and with such good materials in it, and because, he added, he was the best mechanic in town, working in the best-equipped shop. Haze left it with him, certain that it was in honest hands. [*Three by Flannery O'Connor*, p. 59]

Honest hands? The man cheated him by telling him what he wanted to hear. This wasn't his last trip to a repair shop, and the car continued breaking down. His car was a rolling pile of junk, but because he was unwilling to believe the truth, he was vulnerable to someone willing to tell him what he wanted to hear.

In our scripture reading this morning the apostle Paul encourages a young preacher named Timothy. Paul urges him to hold fast to the truth. Timothy has been taught the scriptures all his life. He knows the truth. He needs to stand firm in it and teach it. People lived without TV and radio in the first century, and because of this, public speaking was more important to them than we can quite imagine. Textbooks of the day, written to help students become successful orators, talked about "giving a word in due season." That is, match your message to the occasion; look for the right moment. Paul throws that advice out the window. He tells Timothy to proclaim the message whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.

I love the end of verse 2: "convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching." Have you ever heard a preacher who didn't have an urgent message? You could listen and listen and never hear a call to repent, believe, and follow Christ. You never got the sense that God was doing something important – *right this minute* – and you needed to get on board with it. In contrast, have you ever heard a preacher who pounded you with a hammer? Fire and brimstone, they used to call it. Threats and demands aimed to scare you onto the straight and narrow. Both these approaches seem to me to fail to live up to what Paul had in mind. What does he mean "convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching"? The gospel is urgent. It is important. Yet it should be taught with patience.

The kingdom of God is coming. Christ invites you to be part of it by giving yourself to him. He says he will make you a new creation, a child of God, with a place in the kingdom. The alternative is to miss out on the kingdom and be lost forever. It is

possible that we human beings, abusing the freedom God has given us, can destroy our own souls. You know what's ironic? Most people want to believe we are spiritual beings, that we are more than just a random assortment of material stuff. And, they want to believe we are free, that our choices really matter. So it is easy to convince people we have a soul and genuine freedom, but for some reason it is difficult to get them to accept the idea that we might use our freedom in ways that destroy our soul. Everyone knows we can make choices that damage our physical bodies – eat junk food, no exercise. Why is it so hard to believe we can't do the same thing spiritually? In the physical world, animals adapt to their environment. Penguins survive brilliantly in the arctic, but they would not fare well in the tropics. What if the human race, spiritually speaking, has adapted itself more to hell than to heaven? In that case, our need would be urgent.

Most people find any hint of judgment incompatible with a loving God. I fear judgment because I believe in a loving God. Think of God as being like a big ol' mother bear and all of us are cubs. What does a mother bear do when something threatens her cubs? She fights. Why does she do it? Because she loves her cubs. What do we human beings do to one another all the time? How do we treat one another? If a bear would not let us do to her cubs the sorts of things we do to one another, why would God? Is his love less than a bear's?

Already I have drifted into the next thing I want to say. What has always captured my imagination in this passage is this business about itching ears. The time is coming, Paul warns, when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Sound doctrine, by the way, means nothing more than teaching that is true. Some ideas are true and good because they describe what the world it really like. This makes them practical. What Christianity teaches about the trinity is practical because it describes, as best we can, what God is really like. Sin, the cross, the divinity of Jesus, and all the rest of Christianity's essential teachings – these are sound because they are true. They are true because they describe who we really are and who God is and what God has done.

The Christian message is true. It has a captivating beauty. The truth is always beautiful, because truth belongs to God and God is beautiful. But ... it is not often popular. Paul warns of a coming time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Why? Because they will have itching ears. Itching ears means they want to hear a message that pleases them: "Nothing discomfoting, please. Nothing that makes me think too hard. Nothing that makes me have to believe things the person in the street would find odd, such as the divinity of Jesus. Nothing that might put me in the position of offending anyone. Instead, tell me I am fine just the way I am. Tell me God is a kind of power, like the Force in *Star Wars*, that I can use for my own purposes. Tell me I am my own little god, or at least that I have a spark of divinity in me. Tell me that my ethical choices do not matter much so long as I have the right kind of values and

friends. Do not use the word sin. Do not tell me I need a Savior. Do not tell me I have to chuck out my script for my life and start using God's."

I am convinced, when it comes to ideas, there really is nothing new under the sun. Flannery O'Connor spoofed some crazy ideas she ran across in the 1940s and 50s by putting them into the mouth of her blasphemous hillbilly preacher Hazel Motes. You can find the same ideas in the early days of the church. They remain alluring today. Take one example, the divinity of Jesus. This is *the* big question, and people were torn up about when he was walking around Galilee. It featured significantly in his trial before the Sanhedrin. In the fourth century, the church nearly imploded fighting over it. Some theologians wanted to demote Jesus to less than God because they wanted to distance God as much as possible from suffering. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some Christians began to look for ways to enjoy the benefits of Christianity – the high moral standards and community life – without the baggage of believing in the divinity of Jesus. That doesn't work. All they managed to do was gut the heart and soul out of the church in Europe. In our own day, you can find churches that call themselves churches that do not believe in the divinity of Jesus. Hazel Motes was reinventing the wheel when he founded the "Church without Christ."

In fact, in America today, the religious landscape is so diverse that you can find some church somewhere that says what you want to hear. Since this is the case, let me offer you some advice, for what it's worth, from someone who has studied religion extensively: When you hear a religious message, the question to ask is, "Is it true?" Not, "Do I like it?" Or, "Does it make me feel good?" Or even, "Is it popular?" Truth is a different question from these, and it is the one question that matters.

I would also suggest that one indication of truth is that the teaching challenges you. It challenges you intellectually. If it is too easy to understand and has no mystery at all, be suspicious. God should be difficult for us humans to understand. On the other hand, if it doesn't make sense at all, also be suspicious. Christianity challenges me with mystery – things too deep for me to understand – yet it makes sense. Not only does it hold together well, it makes sense of my life.

True teaching will challenge you ethically and morally. You should already have inside you a little voice saying you are not everything you should be or can be. Be suspicious of anyone who tells you to ignore that voice. It's like a warning light on your dashboard. Hazel Motes will tell you you've got a good car. Then the thermostat blows and your engine melts.

Finally, be suspicious of any teaching that promises an easy road. Christianity is unique on this score. On one hand, it is all about grace. What do you need to do to be saved and gain eternal life? Nothing. Jesus did it for you. You merely accept his gift. And he said, "Come to me all who are weak and carrying heavy burdens [I'd wager he

was talking about religious rules and regulations], and I will give you rest. ... My yoke is easy and my burden is light." So in a way, Christianity offers the easiest road there is. But that's just to get in. That's just to become a child of God. Once you're in, there is another hand. The road is tough, as Jesus warned us so often. Once you come to Jesus, you face pressure outside and inside. Outside, from a world that does not believe and prefers to squeeze you into its mold. Inside, as the rebel-against-God part of you dies and you learn to live by the Spirit.

In conclusion, don't be like Hazel Motes, thinking your car – your life, your soul – is better than it is. Don't listen to preachers like Hazel Motes, who only tell you what you want to hear. Be like Timothy, who knew the scriptures and the truth. Listen to preachers like Paul, who tell you to persevere in the truth and keep going, because the kingdom of God is coming. Amen.

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