

SERMON: MAY 2,2004

Sermon: "Can You Hear Me Now?"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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THEY CAN'T HEAR

"Can you hear me now?"

That's the question asked in a commercial for a cell phone company. Supposedly, no matter how remote the place people are always able to get good reception. Communication never breaks down.

I'm afraid that my experience with cell phones has not been so good. I'm always saying something like, "Hold on. I get better reception by the window. Let me move just a little bit closer. Can you hear me now?"

Isn't modern technology wonderful?

Of course they didn't have cell phones in Jesus' day, but sometimes when I read the gospels, I am reminded of this commercial. No matter how loud or long Jesus proclaims the message, it just seems like many people just don't have "ears to hear." In all the gospels the story is about a failure to communicate. Jesus seems to be saying over and over again, "Can you hear me now?"

"No. Let me say that another way. How about now?" But, no matter where he goes or what he says the story is the same. They can't hear what Jesus is really saying.

Why can't the Jews, the religious people hear Jesus? In our lesson from the gospel of John we learn that the religious people can't hear because they are not Jesus' sheep. They are not a part of his flock. They are not a part of God's kingdom.

They can't hear because they can't recognize the voice of God as it is revealed in the man from Nazareth.

WE CAN'T HEAR

Over the years this passage and passages like this one have been interpreted in a variety of ways. Many have used this passage as a way of saying with pride, "We listen to Jesus because we are Christians. We are a part of the church. Obviously this passage applies to those other people whose beliefs differ from mine."

I bade to disagree. If there is one group in the Bible with which we should always identify, it is those who fail to hear and understand Jesus. All of us tend to wander around in life like a woman or man with a bad cell phone connection. We think we've heard something, but we're not sure. There's too much static on the line.

Communication with God and with each other is disrupted by the static of our personal problems, our political views and even a commitment to a religious tradition that may be in some ways at odds with what God in Christ is really trying to tell us.

One of the slogans of the Reformation and a guiding principle of the Presbyterian Church is “the church reformed, always reforming” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. (See the Book of Order, 2.0200) That’s a way of admitting right up front that we know there is “static” on the line when it comes to hearing the gospel. We admit that in some ways we can’t hear what we need to hear.

And our only hope is cultivating a desire to listen more than we speak. Our only hope is a realization that our interpretations of the gospel, now matter how heartfelt, are just that, our interpretations. We must always be straining to hear the message more completely.

I can tell you from personal experience that the message is never exactly what we expect it to be. God in Christ always guides us in new and unexpected paths. We are reminded over and over again of the truth celebrated on this particular Sunday every year, a Sunday commonly known as Shepherd Sunday. The message for today is this, God in Christ is our shepherd, and we are the sheep of his fold.

SHEEP NOT SHEPHERDS

That, of course, is often the biggest obstacle to really hearing the words of Jesus. In some ways we don’t like that message, especially the part about us being sheep. We want to be the shepherd instead of the sheep. We want to lead instead of following.

Sometimes ministers are referred to as shepherds of their flock. In some churches bishops are installed with great ceremony and are given gilded shepherd’s staff to symbolize their power and authority.

There’s something right about all this I guess. It is the responsibility and privilege of the minister to care for his or her flock. As Peter was charged by the risen Christ to “feed my sheep,” so we are charged to do the same.

But, sometimes I think we take the analogy too far. We become too enamored with our supposed knowledge and power and forget that we are only servants of a greater shepherd. We are not the message. We only relay the message.

Our primary job is not to always be speaking (as we ministers are wont to do) but to always be listening.

And, my friends, as disciples of Jesus Christ, that is your job as well. Sheep, more than anything else, need to hear the voice of their shepherd.

HEARING THE VOICE OF THE MASTER

Several weeks ago as I was working on my computer, a neighbor frantically rang my doorbell. She said, “Your dog is over the fence.” I ran outside to see my beautiful Standard Schnauzer about to venture into the path of an oncoming car. I stopped in my tracks and called his name, “Come Nick. Come.”

He turned, his ears pinned back against his body, his eyes glistened, and I could swear that he had a smile on his mischievous face. He ran toward me as fast as his little legs could carry him.

And he almost knocked me over as he bounded into my arms!

Now, I want you to know that this did not happen by accident. My wife and I spent several weeks with other dog owners trying to teach our puppy just one thing, to listen for the sound of our voice. Every time he came we offered him praise and treats because we knew that one day hearing the voice of his master would be crucial. One day the difference between life and death would depend upon his ability to listen and obey.

So it is with us. It is crucial that we listen, really listen for the voice of Jesus. It is the difference between spiritual life and spiritual death. He is the Messiah. He is God's chosen, but as I have said so many times in the past few weeks, he is not the Messiah we expect. There is always more to Jesus than we can ever imagine.

A LARGE FLOCK

For one thing, Jesus, the great shepherd has a much bigger flock than we expect. In the verses that precede our lesson for today, Jesus proclaimed to his disciples, "I have other sheep which do not belong to this flock." (John 10:16)

Our God is always too small. There is more to this world than merely what happens to "us and ours." God in Christ wants us to develop a global vision and concern for those that we might think are beyond the pale of salvation. God in Christ teaches us that "other sheep" can always come into the fold.

This community called the church that sprang from the life, death and resurrection of Christ is not a closed club. It is a community with an open invitation for all who are willing to come and feast at the Lord's Table. We believe that Jesus, the Bread of Life is food for the world.

That's why we in the Presbyterian Church do not believe in "closed communion." We believe, as I say each month, that this is the "Lord's Table" and our "Savior invites those who trust him to share the feast which he has prepared." Open communion is symbolic of our openness to others, a radical belief in inclusiveness that knows no borders.

When I look out over this congregation, I see sheep from many "flocks." We are diverse in so many ways, and I praise God for this diversity because I see it as a glimpse of heaven. I truly see it as a foretaste of that kingdom in which people will come from east and west, north and south to sit at table in the Kingdom of God.

I want our diversity to grow instead of diminish because I believe this is how God speaks to us. When we listen to voices from many places, it helps us overcome our own prejudices and preconceived ideas. It helps us discern between what is really the voice of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and what is the sound of our own desire.

THE MALLET HEADED MESSIAH

I think it's instructive to note that our lesson for today is set during one of the major Jewish religious festivals, the Festival of the Dedication. This festival was the same as our modern day celebration of Hanukkah. It commemorated the purification and rededication of the temple after the Syrian King, Antiochus Epiphanes in the year 165 BC, defiled it.

A leading figure in this victory was a man by the name of Judas Maccabeus. I think that Judas and his family became prototypes for messianic expectations in the time of Jesus. These were people who courageously did by force what needed to be done. They threw the rascals out. In fact their family name said it all. Judas, son of Matthias was nicknamed "Maccabee" which probably meant something like "mallet headed" or "hammerer."

This was the kind of Messiah everyone wanted in those days. They didn't want a "peacenik." They wanted "the Rock." They wanted a mallet headed hammerer who would beat the enemy into submission. They wanted someone who would confirm their cherished idea that they and they alone were God's people.

And because of that, they weren't open to what Jesus was actually saying and doing. They were only concerned about their own agenda. So, in our lesson for today the deaf and blind religious people surround Jesus and demand an answer.

"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly?"

NOT THE MESSIAH WE EXPECT

Throughout the gospel of John, the words and works of Jesus seem to speak for themselves. From the very beginning of John's gospel the people who have experienced his healing touch call him Messiah. (See for example John 1:41; 4:29; 7:26-42) Jesus told the religious people in effect,

"I let my actions do the talking. I am the Messiah. But, since I'm not the kind of Messiah you're expecting, you can't hear a word I say. You're not a part of my flock because you won't listen to what I'm really saying."

I wonder. What part of the gospel do we fail to hear? How is our view of the gospel influenced by what we think God in Christ "must" be and do?

I think those of us who are more liberal in our views sometimes miss the call of the gospel to moral purity, courage and righteous living. And I think those of us who are more conservative in our views sometimes miss the warnings in the Bible about the dangers of nationalism and living by the sword instead of the way of peace.

Now I know that those are very broad generalizations. But, remarkably they do hold true in many cases. Both groups use the name of Christ to make their points, but they both have significant blind spots.

We need each other in order to hear the word of Christ more clearly. We need to examine together the words and actions of Christ and have the courage to ask ourselves quite frankly, "What does this mean for how we should live today?"

We will probably come up with different answers on many points, and will just have to agree to disagree at times. But, this does not mean that the conversation should be avoided. Only through an open discussion can we begin to figure out the source of our beliefs and change them to reflect more nearly God's self revelation in Jesus Christ.

There is much talk in the church these days about the need for diversity. People are saying (and rightly so) that we are the Body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it. But that unity does not mean a dull uniformity. Unity means a willingness to try and discern the will of God as we struggle together with Scripture in an attempt to seek God's will.

And God's will is almost never found in the way that is most popular.

In Jesus' day people thought that they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what kind of person the Messiah would be. They thought they knew what he would come to do. They were 100% wrong! Jesus was the opposite of what they expected.

Instead of being a hammer who broke his enemies he was a Savior who sacrificed himself for his enemies. Instead of promoting one nation over all the others, he offered hope to the whole world. Instead of going along with the exploitation of women and children, Jesus healed them and lifted them up as signs of the coming kingdom in which the weakest members of society would be the most important.

If they were so wrong about Jesus back then, if they couldn't hear him on account of their own noisy ways, don't you think that we could be wrong about Jesus from time to time too? I think so. I know so.

SELECTIVE HEARING

Someone once accidentally told me what they really believed. We were in the middle of a debate about the life of Jesus, and I point out some Bible verses that supported my view. They replied, "Don't confuse me with the Bible, my faith is made up."

And so it was. And often that is true of us as well. Our faith is made up. Our faith is more about tradition and politics and what we want instead of what Jesus actually said and did.

Sometimes I think the problem is not that we don't hear or even understand the voice of Jesus. The problem is that we have selective hearing, filtering out all those things that we don't want to hear.

I was bragging earlier about how my Schnauzer will come when I call. Most of the time that is true. But, sometimes, given the right distraction, he develops selective hearing. He looks at me for a moment and then cocks his head as if to say, "I don't understand English silly human. I'm a German dog." Then he continues his barking tirade against the offending squirrel or bird as if I had never called at all.

The distraction of what he wants is just too great at the moment. So it can be for us.

We can hear the voice of Jesus in our hour of need and be grateful.

But, it is more difficult to hear his voice when he calls us to follow him through the valley of the shadow of death. It is more difficult to hear him when his call involves self-denial. It is more difficult to hear him when his call involves the challenge of loving those who persecute us.

Then, we develop a case of selective hearing and suggest that the Christian way is an "impossible ideal" and not a practical guide for living.

I disagree. I believe that the way of Christ is God's way. I believe that the impossible becomes possible through the power of His Spirit. I believe that through the voice of Jesus we are enabled to hear the very voice of God Himself.

So, Jesus invites us once again to listen for his voice. He asks us, "Can you hear me now?" We respond not only with our words but also with our actions. Lord help us hear and obey.

Amen.