

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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John 10:22-30 (NRSV)

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, [23] and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. [24] So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." [25] Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; [26] but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. [27] My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. [28] I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. [29] What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. [30] The Father and I are one."

HEARING THE VOICE OF JESUS

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice." Can you hear the voice of Jesus? I'm sure we would like to say "yes" but honestly, sometimes we're not so sure. What is Jesus saying to us today? How do we know that the voice we hear is the voice of Jesus or some other voice?

This is a critical and a difficult question to answer. Down through the years many terrible things have been done in the name of Jesus. Wars have been fought, and terrible destruction has been wrought all in the name of Jesus.

Did the voice of Jesus really tell them to do what they did? From our vantage point we can confidently say, "No, of course not. Isn't it terrible? Those poor benighted souls misunderstood and misused the name of Jesus. I'm glad we're not that way."

But, can we be so sure? If people of every age have misrepresented Jesus, if people of every age have failed to hear and heed the voice of Jesus, we have to at least consider the possibility that we sometimes do the same thing.

"How can this be?" You might ask. Many of us have studied the teachings and stories about Jesus since we were children. Surely we know his voice?

Surely we can answer the simple question, “What would Jesus do?” Isn’t it obvious?

Well, it’s not always so obvious. How we perceive the world is often deeply colored by our assumptions and our own personal history. The Bible always talks about having “eyes to see and ears to hear” God’s message.

In other words, in order to hear God’s word as revealed in Jesus, we have to be open to something new and unexpected. We have to listen carefully. And, believe it or not, listening is not something that the average person finds easy to do.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Sometimes we assume that because a person is familiar to us that we know them and that we listen to what they have to say. This is especially true when it comes to our spouse or a family member. But, many counselors will tell you that this is often not true.

How does the old song go? We always hurt the ones we love. We hurt the ones we love because we often ignore the ones we love. We do not listen to them. We make assumptions instead.

We assume that we already know what that other person is thinking and feeling. And this false assumption causes all sorts of problems. This causes us to distort reality, and it sometimes causes the breakdown of the relationship. “You never listen to me” the lonely loved one cries. And it’s often true.

I think that every important relationship in our lives needs an element of mystery. We need to always ask ourselves, “I wonder what she thinks about this or I wonder what his opinion might be about that.”

Assumptions can be deadly. Do away with your assumptions if you want to strengthen your important relationships. People instinctively know when you are really listening to them. And when you really listen, some amazing breakthroughs can be made.

LISTENING TO JESUS

In the same way, our relationship with Jesus breaks down because we do not listen to him. We assume that we already know what he has to say and so we do not have that quiet time to be still and know God.

We are too busy speaking. We are too busy telling Jesus who he is and what he needs to do for us in order to make our lives happy and healthy. There is no mystery in our relationship with him.

But, mystery is an important element in our relationship with Jesus. If there is no mystery in that relationship, we will not listen. Our love for Jesus will not grow. We may even grow apart to the point that we are no longer hear his voice and are not a part of his flock.

One of the great advantages of being a pastor is that every week I get a chance to preach on a Bible passage that is often very familiar to me. The temptation is to say to myself, "I know what this passage means. I've preached five different sermons on this passage."

But, you'll be happy to know that over the years I've learned to resist temptation, at least some of the time. I've learned to try and read the passage as if I were reading it for the first time.

I struggle with the passage. Sometimes I ask hard questions and live with the fact that there are no easy answers. I resist the temptation to come up with a sermon too quickly. I spend a lot of time thinking and listening.

Someone once wrote that the "prophets spoke when they heard from God, but the parish minister speaks every Sunday whether he hears from God or not!" That's true. There does come a time when a sermon must be produced.

But, I have found that if I put in that time to really listen to what a passage has to say, more often than not God does speak to me in a new and exciting way. To be honest with you, I am more excited about preaching today than I ever have been in my life because I am just now learning to listen, really listen to Jesus.

LISTENING TO SCRIPTURE

I've come to believe that this is an important process for everyone, not just for ministers. If you want to hear the voice of Jesus, I would suggest that you spend some time listening to his voice as it comes to you in Scripture.

Don't try and read too much, and don't be too quick to say, "I know what that means." And don't be too quick to pull out the commentary and rely upon what somebody else says about Jesus.

Just listen to what Jesus says. Think about it. Allow his words to become a part of your thought process and your conversations with other people. Don't jump to conclusions. Your relationship with Jesus will deepen, and you will come to appreciate just how many good things the Lord does in your life.

One of the reasons that I print the Lectionary passages in the bulletin and base my Bible studies on the text that I have chosen to preach on is that it allows all of us to listen to Jesus together.

I like to cook on the grill, and one thing I have learned about cooking on the grill. If you let the meat marinate overnight, it tastes a lot better the next day when you cook it. In the same way, we need to let the words of Christ "marinate" in our hearts.

That time we spend listening will be richly rewarded by a "tasty" meal in the long run. We will feast on his word and learn what he meant when he said that men and women do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God. (Matthew 4:4)

THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Today's lesson gives us some ground rules that we need to follow if we are to hear the words of Jesus, if we are to really listen to him. The first one is to beware of theological assumptions.

Presbyterians are particularly fond of systematic theology, and I think that is a good thing. If we don't have a good understanding of the great themes of the

Bible, we will be at the mercy of every crackpot who manipulates the words of the Bible for his or her own purposes.

But, even when it comes to our confessions of faith, there is a word of caution. Our theological assumptions need to be subject to the words of Jesus. For example, in the Book of Order we read, “The confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.”

In today’s lesson we see why that is important. The theological assumptions of the Jewish leaders prevented them from really hearing and understanding Jesus.

MESSIANIC ASSUMPTIONS

The Scripture tells us that this encounter takes place during the Feast of the Dedication. Today we know this as the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah.

Around 165 BC the Syrians conquered Jerusalem and a particularly despicable Syrian leader by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes sought to institute the worship of Greek gods in the temple. The Jews resisted and many were killed in horrible ways.

But, one courageous man, Judas Maccabeus led an insurrection against the invaders. His insurgency was successful after three years, and he became the prototypical example of a messiah. The messianic figure would lead his people in a military victory.

The rededication of the temple is celebrated with a festival of lights every winter, and in this setting on the front porch of the temple, the Jews crowd in around Jesus and ask him this pointed question,

“Are you the Messiah? Answer yes or no. We don’t want any vague, symbolic answers about this. Tell us plainly.”

When Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people earlier in this gospel, the people wanted to make Jesus their king. But, Jesus wouldn’t go along with it.

He told the crowd that they needed more than bread. They needed the bread of life. Instead of seeking a free meal, they needed to seek God.

But, they didn't understand what Jesus was trying to tell them. Their needs and assumptions made them deaf and blind to the obvious.

Now they are trying again to get Jesus to go along with their plan for the kingdom once more. They need a Messiah to lead them in battle, and they want Jesus to tell them plainly if he was their man or not. "Tell us plainly Jesus. Are you the Messiah?"

It's almost like these people who are running for president, but they haven't made a formal announcement yet. Everyone knows that they're acting like a presidential candidate. But, they keep everyone in suspense. They say, "I need to meet with advisors and think about this a while longer." And the reporters say, "Don't play games with us. Tell us plainly if you're a candidate."

MESSIANIC ACTIONS

Jesus finally relents and tells them plainly what they want to hear. He says, "Of course I'm the Messiah. I not only claim to be the Messiah, I do things to prove it." Jesus' compassionate miracles attest to his power and his position. His actions speak louder than words.

The Jewish leaders had known for some time that there was something special about Jesus. For example, when the Jewish leader, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, he began by telling Jesus, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." (John 3:2)

But, they could not understand the meaning behind these miraculous signs. They could not hear the voice of Jesus because they did not anticipate his messianic message.

The symbol of Judas Maccabeus was a ram. That was the kind of Messiah the people expected and wanted in those days. They wanted someone who would ram their enemies and bring them victory. They were not willing to

follow a Messiah who emphasized loving enemies and establishing a kingdom based upon forgiveness and grace.

And to be honest, we're not so keen on that kind of Messiah either. But, if we want to hear the voice of the Great Shepherd, we need to open ourselves to his way. His way is the way of compassion and forgiveness. His definition of what it means to be a Messiah is seen most clearly in the works that Jesus did.

FOLLOWING THE SHEPHERD

And we need to follow in that path.

Listening to Jesus involves more than reading the Bible and having endless theological discussions about the Messiah. Listening to the Shepherd means following the shepherd. When Jesus calls, we must come after him. We must replicate his works of mercy.

And when we do that, when we participate in works of mercy, we are changed. We are given a sense of security and hope for the future. We truly hear his voice. We know that our salvation is sure and that no one can snatch us out of his hand.

We recognize the voice of our Savior in the needy one that we serve. We learn that Jesus is more than just a Messiah, he is also our Lord. We find God in Jesus, and we truly become his sheep.

I talked with a minister once who was asked to analyze the giving pattern of his church. He generally didn't like to know who gave what but because the leadership had given him this task, he took a look at the pledges.

What he found taught him a lot about Christian discipleship.

He found that the people who were active in the ministry of the church, those who were leading and serving had actually increased their pledges to the church, and he noted that they were more positive in their evaluations of the church's present ministry.

But, those that the minister had served the most were not so positive. They had been in his office every week for counseling and yet they never seemed satisfied with the church or what he had to offer. They always wanted more. These were the people who gave little or nothing toward the work of the church and took a lot.

What was going on here? Those who served in the name of Christ also heard his voice and felt spiritually satisfied. Those who only desired to be served were dissatisfied not only with their own lack of spiritual growth but also with those who sought to help them.

You cannot hear the voice of Jesus unless you are willing to follow him.

HOW DO YOU HEAL A BROKEN HEART?

There's an old Chinese tale about a woman whose only son had died. In her grief she went to the holy man and said, "What magical incantations do you have that will bring my son back to life?"

The holy man said, "Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life."

The woman set out in search of the magical seed.

She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked on the front door and said, "I am seeking a home that has never known sadness? Is this the place?"

They told her, "You have come to the wrong place." They began to describe all the tragic things that had befallen them. And the woman said to herself, "Who is more able to help these poor people than myself, who has known great sorrow?"

So she stayed on and comforted them, then went on in search for a home that had never known sorrow. But, wherever she turned, in homes great and small, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. In fact she became so involved in ministering to other people's grief that she forgot about her quest for the magical seed. Her ministry to others had lessened the sorrow in her own life.

I sometimes wonder if when Jesus told his disciples to “take up their cross” and follow him if he didn’t mean at least in part something like this. Maybe he meant for us to use our pain as a way to understand the pain of others. Maybe he meant for us to use our sorrow as a way to understand the sorrow of others.

And as we respond to his voice and follow him, as we serve others selflessly in his name, something happens to us. We find hope, an eternal hope that will not pass away. We find that no matter where we go and what happens to us, God in Christ is with us and cares for us every step of the way.

Can you hear the voice of the Shepherd? He is calling your name today. Serve him. Trust him. Follow him.

Amen.