

SERMON: HOW CAN WE HEAR THE VOICE OF JESUS?

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."

STATIC ON THE LINE

Several weeks ago I gave my mom a call on my cell phone. But, I couldn't hear what she had to say. There was too much static on the line. We tried to talk for a while, but finally I just gave up and said,

“I’ll call back and see if we can get a better connection.”

If there were cell phones in Jesus’ day I might have suggested that he hang up and try to get a better connection. In the gospels it seems like there is static on the line when Jesus is speaking to the people. No matter how loud or long Jesus proclaims the message, it just seems like some just don’t have “ears to hear.” There is a failure to communicate.

It’s troubling that the religious people are especially hard of hearing when it comes to Jesus. Why can’t God’s chosen ones hear Jesus?

In our lesson from the gospel of John we learn that they can’t hear Jesus because they are not willing to listen. They don’t recognize the voice of God in the man from Nazareth because the man and his message are so different from what they expect to hear.

What about us? Can we hear Jesus? Do we recognize the voice of God in Jesus? Do we hear and obey what he says?

Over the years many have used this passage as a way of saying we’re right and you’re wrong. They say 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.”

But, 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 that we too won’t be misled by our pride? 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.

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, the static of our political views and even the static of a religious tradition that may be (at least in some ways) at odds with what God in Christ is really trying to tell us.

ASSUMPTIONS CAUSE US TO BE DEAF

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.

Maxie Dunam tells a story about a businessman whose wife was experiencing depression. She began to mope around and be sad, lifeless ... no light in her eyes ... no spring in her step.

It became so bad that the husband made an appointment with a psychiatrist. On the appointed day they went to the psychiatrist's office, and sat

down with him and began to talk. It wasn't long before the wise old doctor realized what was wrong.

Without saying a word, he simply walked over to the woman's chair, signaled her to stand, took her by the hands, looked at her in the eyes for a long time, then gathered her into his arms and gave her a big, warm hug.

You could see the change come over the woman. Her face softened, her eyes lit up, she immediately relaxed. Her whole face glowed.

Stepping back the doctor said to the husband, "See, that's all she needs."

With that the man said, "Okay. I'll bring her in Tuesdays and Thursdays each week, but I have to play golf the other afternoons."

The husband couldn't hear what the psychiatrist had to say because he couldn't imagine that he was part of the problem.

We hurt the ones we love because we often ignore the ones we love. We do not listen to them. Instead of listening, we make assumptions.

We assume that we already know what that other person is thinking and feeling. And this 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.

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 stray to the point that we are no longer hear his voice and are not a part of his flock.

ALWAYS REFORMING

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.

This Sunday we remember that Jesus is our shepherd and we are the sheep of his fold. There is one big fact that we need to know about sheep. Sheep are weak and helpless. They make dumb mistakes. Sheep depend entirely upon the shepherd.

That, of course, is not what we want to hear. We don't like to think of ourselves as dependent and weak. We like to think of ourselves as smart and in control.

But, let's be honest. We are weak and dependent. Let a hurricane blow or a volcano erupt and all our plans are put on hold indefinitely. All our advances in technology are rendered useless by one small hiccup in the natural order.

We are sheep. We are totally dependent upon the providential care of God. And as sheep our number one job is not to speak. Our number one job is to listen for the voice of the shepherd.

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 BIGGER 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

BEWARE OF 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.

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." 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 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.

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.

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?”

Jesus had told them plainly, but they couldn't hear. The message was not what they expected or wanted.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

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.

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?

Someone once accidentally told me what they really believed. We were in the middle of a debate about the life of Jesus, and I pointed 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.

REPLACING FEAR WITH FAITH

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. We are afraid of a word of challenge or change.

Though we do walk through the "valley of the shadow of death," though we do have difficult days as we seek to follow Jesus there is a promise in this passage that gives us hope.

Do you remember the old insurance commercial? You're in good hands with Allstate. Well, Jesus says something similar and of course much, much more profound. If you're in the hands of Jesus you're in God's hands. And God is going to care for you today and for all eternity.

It is this promise that allows us to put our daily struggle into perspective. As the Apostle Paul put it, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

If we are in God’s hands who is going to harm us? Who is going to snatch us out of God’s hands? The answer is no one. The promises of God are sure and the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus is forever.

The number one reason people don’t listen to Jesus or to each other is that they are afraid. And their fears prevent them from being all that they could be. Their fears prevent them from really listening.

Jesus invites people everywhere to put away their fears. Jesus invites people everywhere to trust and obey.

Listen for the voice of Jesus my friends. He is the Great Shepherd and we are his sheep.

Amen.