

4th Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Auburn, NY
Rev. Steven W. Plank

“Listening for the Voice of Christ”

Text: John 10:4b – “... they know his voice.”

Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:42-47
John 10:1-10

Proposition: It sometimes is difficult to hear what Jesus might be saying to us, with all of the other noise around us in the world. But in this Easter season we strive to be “Listening for the Voice of Christ,” and following when we hear him.

Prayer for Illumination: Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The story tells of a monk who entered a monastery a long, long time ago. The order of monks at that monastery voluntarily entered into a life of silence when they took their final vows. The only exception was that once every three years each monk could go to their spiritual director and the abbot of the monastery and utter two words... any two words they wanted. One young man had entered the monastery, gone through the long process of being a postulant, then a novice, then a professed monk, then a life professed monk. It is neither a short nor an easy process. He had completed the years of training and discernment, and had taken his final vows. Things seemed to be going well, except after his first three years of total silence, he went in to meet with his director and his abbot, looked at them, and said simply: “Food bad.” Another three years went by, and it was that time again. He went in to the room with his two advisors and said: “Bed hard.” Yet

another three years passed, the time came for him to meet with his director and abbot, and he said with disdain, “I quit!” He walked out of the room, and the one monk looked at the abbot and quietly broke the two-word-in-three-years rule: “Good riddance! All he’s done is complain since he got here!”

The first time I visited a monastery similar to the one in this invented story, I intended to stay from Friday afternoon through noon on Monday. I lasted until about 10:30 on Saturday morning! The silence, which I thought would be a welcome respite from the noisy world, drove me absolutely *crazy*! I didn’t know what to do with myself during the silence. I didn’t know what to do with the noise that I heard coming from inside of me... noise that was troubling and loud... noise that was indicative of a noisy heart, filled with all sorts of things that distracted me from those things I most wanted to do, to be. Over the decades since that first monastic venture, I’ve learned to embrace silence, to welcome silence, to *need* times of silence in my life. It is during those quiet times that I have learned to try to listen more attentively for the voice of Christ, to discern his leading and his presence in my life, to see the ways in which I have experienced Christ through the compassion and actions of other people in my life. Trying to discern Christ’s presence... to “Listen for the Voice of Christ”... is what is most important in life for we who call ourselves Christian... and it might well be what is most difficult, most elusive. How do we listen for the voice of Jesus, who claims us in the waters of our baptisms, who nourishes us each and every time we gather around his Table, who calls us to lives of meaningful service, of compassion, and of peace?

We “Listen for the Voice of Christ’ as we read Scripture. I was talking with a friend of mine several weeks ago about something new that I saw in one of the suggested lectionary readings for an upcoming Sunday. She said, “How many

times have you read through the Bible?” I said I really didn’t know: several times, anyhow, plus regular devotional reading and study. “You know the Bible that well, and you *still* find new things in it?” she asked. I do. Over the years I’ve come to appreciate anew the *living, dynamic* nature of these ancient words. We Christians argue sometimes about the meaning of some of the words in that sacred book, but it’s still to that book that we return, again and again. If we want to find out what we ought to be doing in our lives to be faithful disciples of Christ, faithful servants of God, faithful vessels of the Holy Spirit, then it is to Scripture that we go. Scripture guides us and shapes our discipleship and our lives of faith.

We “Listen for the Voice of Christ” in community. A Christian who also is a hermit is an oxymoron. A Christian who tries to exist outside of the community of faith misses so much of what is vital to authentic spirituality. A few years ago, one of the research opinion arms of Georgetown University released a poll of Roman Catholics. They found that some 60% of Catholics in this country believe that you can be a good, faithful Christian without going to Sunday mass. I wonder what the polling results would be among Protestants? Not much different, I would guess; certainly not any lower. Even the ancient desert monks in the first few centuries of the Church’s life, who kept the faith alive in the deserts of Arabia and Africa and the Middle East, lived together within community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 20th century German theologian, said that when Christ calls a person, he calls that person into community. He wrote that the Church is not a perfect place, by any means; it is the communion of sinners as well as the communion of saints. But the Church is the place where the Body of Christ finds substance and takes on flesh and blood.

We “Listen for the Voice of Christ” in circumstances sometimes. Decades ago now, I thought about going back for an advanced degree and teaching at the university or seminary level. I sat through a Saturday morning marathon of tests... including math tests that I had been a stranger to since high school days!... and submitted the results of the Graduate Record Exam to different schools. I was thrilled to learn that I had been accepted into the Ph.D. program at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a fine Jesuit school. They liked my proposal to study in the field of historical theology. The letter concluded, though, by saying, “Everything looks great. We’d love to have you come. Unfortunately we don’t have any money to offer you.” I smiled quietly, and wrote them back: “Similarly, from my perspective, everything looks great. I’d love to attend your school. Unfortunately, I don’t have any money to offer you, either!” I’m a Calvinist, right? It was the will of God, I concluded... Christ’s voice speaking through those particular circumstances.

We “Listen for the Voice of Christ” echoing through the actions of people around us. As I journeyed through my Dad’s increasing dementia and his death... as I had unexpected complications from a surgery several years ago... as I suffered my own grief at the premature loss of my first grandchild and watched helplessly as our son and daughter-in-law dealt with a grief that I can’t begin to imagine... as people who have offered me words of comfort, love, compassion, support, healing, grace, and also as people have just sat silently with me when I had no words to say... through those, and so many, *too* many other things, I have been surrounded by congregations who cared, who showed compassion, who granted me time to grieve and recover and re-enter work and ministry. *In those acts of kindness and compassion I have heard the voice of Christ.* It is as we share moments of grace

and compassion with others in need, that Christ speaks through us, speaks through our actions, speaks through our words.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Christ talks with his disciples about the abundant and meaningful life that we find in him. He talks about how following his examples of faith and love, of grace and compassion, will unfold for us the paths down which *we* should walk each day, each moment. And he assures us that we will hear him speaking to us, sense his guiding of us, be moved by his love and care for us, and be able to “Listen for the Voice of Christ” that comes. What we know is that his voice comes in different times, through an ancient book, through people around us, through kind, compassionate, and grace-filled acts. His voice comes when we stir the waters of baptism. His voice comes when we sit around the Table he sets for us. His voice comes in more ways than we previously might have imagined. What *we* need to do is strive to be “Listening for the Voice of Christ,” and then, simply, faithfully, follow when we hear him.

AMEN!