

SERMON: "RECOGNIZING JESUS' VOICE"
TEXT: NEW TESTAMENT ACTS 2:42-47
NEW TESTAMENT JOHN 10:1-10

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INTRODUCTION

I was walking the beast when it struck me. I was thinking about this sermon Clarence helps me with my sermon prep. Here's what he helped me see. I have five sermons left, including this one, to share with you before we pack up the 120 pound dog, the two cats and a household full of memories and move back to NC to be closer to our family.

Five more opportunities to sit with you together under God's word. Five out of what would total, over eleven plus years, to be around 500 such opportunities. What a gift you have given me, to listen, to be part of our ongoing conversation, a dialogue.

I wonder what you've heard over those 11 years and 500 sermons. What are the recurring themes you've heard from this pulpit? We'll circle back to that question in a bit. What got Clarence and I thinking about sermons past, present and future was this passage from John.

Those verses about knowing the shepherd's voice got me thinking about when and where we hear Jesus' voice ... how Johnny and I have been given the opportunity and responsibility to try and channel Jesus' voice AND how challenging it is to hear Jesus' voice amongst all the other voices that fill our ears, minds and hearts ... and in our day and time, our screens

This passage raises that question contrasting the shepherd to the bandit Whose voice gets our attention, gets us to follow? This question / contrast is a follow up on the longer story in chapter eight that precedes this one, the story of Jesus' healing a man born blind, how that healing stirred up a controversy with the Pharisees, who question the man who was healed.

The Pharisees, in Jesus' telling, are the bandits ... not the shepherds. Gail O'Day and Susan Hylan in their commentary on John write.

In all likelihood, the Pharisees are used to seeing themselves as shepherds, not as bandits. Yet Jesus' words interpret their response to the healing of the blind man in precisely those terms. The Pharisees endanger the flock, as demonstrated in their behavior to the blind man.

CONNECTION

The connection between the story of how religious leaders can question and even condemn a man being healed and the story of Jesus as a shepherd who protects the sheep from the bandits is intentional.

Jesus is telling us how we might hear and recognize his voice.

He is telling us how we can tell the difference between bandit and shepherd
Does that person recognize us, call us by name, know us?
Do we recognize their voice? Jesus says it like this ...

the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.

They know the shepherd's voice. They do, we do, because we know him and he knows us. He knows our name. I remember being intimidated by that when I started my ministry with you, a little worried about asking for prayer concerns. I remember thinking, "I've got to learn some names. lots of them and learn them quickly."

Some wisdom in that, making the effort to learn someone's name.

How might we recognize Jesus' voice in such a loud world filled with so many voices raising the volume? Might I make a few preacher-like suggestions of how to hear Jesus' voice amongst so many others?
Some alliteration, three things – *connection, context and consistency*.

Connection – making the effort to get to know someone

A lesson preachers are wise to learn. Best way to be heard, to be listened to? That begins with the one who is going to be doing the talking on Sundays to do some listening first (and to keep listening). Listen to the individual to the congregation and to the larger community. Listen first. Listen often.

Who has made the effort to get to know you? And this goes two ways,
Who have you made the effort to get to know, learned any new names?
I hope you'll remember how often I have told you that one of the best ways to love your neighbors as you have been commanded to do is to get to know them, learn their names, learn about them, learn from them

That may well be why Jesus' got frustrated with the Pharisees
Sure they knew all the rules (in detail) but did they know the people?
Think about it ... they were upset that someone was healed
Connection isn't just knowing someone else, knowing their name
Connection is wanting what is best for them - not just your version of best rammed down (or legislated down) their throats

CONTEXT

One of my favorite quotes from Billy Graham is this one about love from the little book Peace Prayers.

Love is not a vague feeling or abstract idea. When I love someone, I seek what is best for them. If I begin to take the love of Christ seriously, then I will work towards what is best for my neighbor. I will seek to bind up the wounds and bring about healing, no matter what the cost may be.

That is how we are to connect to one another. You hear somebody saying things like this, about doing what's best for our neighbor, about healing. That sounds to me like the voice of Jesus speaking up, speaking out. Who are you connected to who's helping you connect to others?

About connections. Please hear me. Listening for Jesus' voice is not just about listening to people with whom we are already connected, familiar voices. It is about that ... plus more and more connections beyond our boundaries. Experience is teaching us, if we have ears to hear, that if we only listen to familiar voices we're going to get stuck in our feedback loops.

About that, our feedback loops, our algorithms, let's talk connection and context. *Context* - Listening for Jesus' voice in spaces filled with other voices, we'd be wise to notice the patterns of speech that fill our ears and screens.

Thinking back about 100 years ago, Aldus Huxley wrote A Brave New World. It is a look at the future he sees coming. It's also a conversation with George Orwell, who wrote 1984 with his own dystopian version of the future. Both men envisioned a time where the powerful few would keep the people in line, especially through media – the voices we hear.

Orwell's 1984 sees a world where words are tightly controlled – Big Brother. The world today includes societies where this is the case. Putin's Russia. But I would argue that Huxley's prediction is the more accurate. Huxley saw a world where the powerful used their voices to do what we would call "flooding the zone." Overwhelm us with words.

Those words today come at us with great volume, volume as in frequency and volume as in loud and attention grabbing. We the people have gone along with this – our faces in our phones, waiting for the next post. Markets and media respond to the posts of our leaders like Pavlov's dogs. Posts are understood as official government statements and policies.

Post one thing, post another and another. How many threats have been made, how many deadlines set, how many news stories about the latest post.

SUMMARY

When Clarence and I were counting up the Sundays and the sermons
we couldn't help but think how those 500 sermons fit in with the amount
of time you've spent reading posts and stories about posts
Got me thinking about sermon time relative to screen time

Started to make me a little sad. Clarence picked up on that sadness
So he took the lead and pulled me along like he's the boat and I'm the skier
There are times we need those rather abrupt changes of direction

So here is one. Listening for Jesus' voice means paying attention to
Connection – how does this connect me to my neighbor
Context – how does Jesus' voice fit in with all the other voices
Some helpful, some harmful ... And *Consistency*

Sure seems to me that Jesus' is rather consistent in what he is saying
He's always making known his love for us and for them by reaching out,
regularly stretching our boundaries. So about listening for Jesus' voice ...
Is what we're hearing from pulpit and post consistent with Jesus' teaching
Example - How does Jesus talk about 'those people?' How do we?

So circling back ... Can I ask for your help with a little exercise?
Starting in the middle of June I will be serving as the interim pastor at
Community Presbyterian Church in Pinehurst, North Carolina
I will be following a beloved pastor who has been there 20 years
I want to help them recognize that solid foundation and build on it

I will be asking them, beginning with their staff and Session, to name
the recurrent themes they have heard over those years and decades
Ask them what they have heard repeated and reinforced. Thought it
would be a good way to start there ... and to wrap things up here

The cards are in the bulletin that I might ask you the same question I will be
asking them. What are the recurring themes, things you've heard repeated
and reinforced. It might be what I said earlier about loving your neighbor by
getting to know them or something about my love for Ranch dressing

Please take some time and fill them out, maybe today and put it in the plate
Or bring it back next week. Or send me an email or a text

I welcome the witty ones, but what I'd really like to see is what you've heard me
say about Jesus, about following him. I've tried my best to be connected
to my neighbors, mindful of our context and above all consistent about Jesus,
his words, his works. And if your answers say something different ...
I'm going to need Clarence to pull me along and set me straight.