

“Open Our Eyes: Hear All the People”

Matthew 10:24-39

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material supplied by the UMC’s General Board of Discipleship¹

Let me begin this morning with a question: Who has your ear? Who do you listen to? As I think back over my life, the answer to that question has changed over time.

When I was a child, I listened to my parents and teachers. I tried to follow their guidance and directions...most of the time.

As a teenager, well, you know. Parents were the last ones I paid attention to. Friends and music became more influential for me, as they are for just about all teenagers.

When I was in my 20s and 30s, there were new voices in my life. Yes, my young bride was one of them, and still is today. The other was Uncle Sam—I spent eight years serving in the US Army right after Joyce and I were married.

There have also been professors and mentors and writers who had my ear over the years, and I delighted in their wise advice.

Yes, God’s voice was in there too. For me, listening for God’s voice became more important as I grew older; it remains so today as, day by day, I seek to hear God’s voice.

So, the people we hear can change over time. And we need to recognize there are many voices that try to speak into our lives; some are good influences, some not so much. I suppose the key is, who are you listening to the most right now? Who has your ear? To whom do you listen?

That seems to be a key question Jesus presents to his disciples in today’s lesson. Jesus is in the process of explaining the mission he is sending them on. He told them:

- To proclaim the good news of God’s coming kingdom to the Jewish people.
- To “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” (Matthew 10:8)
- To stay in one house when they enter a town; to shake the dust off their feet if they were rejected.
- And they were warned about the risks they would face: persecutions, arrests, beatings, and more.

Now Jesus closes his instructions by reminding them:

“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.”

In other words: have some humility. Too often we only listen to ourselves; that’s the disciple being greater than the master part of the proverb. We need some humility, a quality that’s in short supply today; we need to hear real experts in their fields. When we put ourselves above the teacher, we make ourselves the center of existence. And when that happens, when we listen only (or primarily) to ourselves, the result of this one-way conversation is self-centeredness, brokenness in relationships, and brokenness in spirit. Who has your ear? Who do you listen to?

“What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered proclaim from the housetops” (Matthew 10:27).

What you hear in the dark that speaks of the voice of God, tell it in the light. What could Jesus mean by this?

¹ “Open Our Eyes,” Sermon Series, prepared by Discipleship Ministries of the General Board of Discipleship, United Methodist Church, Week 3: Hear All the People, article on internet, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/open-our-eyes>, accessed 20 May 2020.

What if, in our context, it means that sometimes God speaks in unlikely places or through unexpected people? If that is so, and I believe it is sometimes true, then we have to be listening to the world, to the people around us. **We need to hear all the people.**

A famous theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, once said: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”² There’s lots of truth to that. We need to hear the voices in the world around us, the cries of pain, the lamentations of grief, the struggles, the tragedies. When we interpret, or hear them, through the filter of the Bible, we know the need and we can share the hope for new life through Jesus Christ.

Now, not everything being spoken in the world is from God. There is plenty being spoken in our world today that is the opposite of what God is whispering in our ears and the ears of others. Even so, we need to be listening for the times when that still small voice of God speaks to us. Not every word in our world today is a good word. We cannot claim “it’s all good!” because it clearly isn’t. But the point is this: good is being spoken, and sometimes it comes from unlikely places or unexpected people.

I’m sure many of you have been surprised by some the things children say.

I can remember, probably 15 years ago, teaching a children’s lesson during worship. There was one little girl, maybe eight years old, who knew the answer to every question. She understood the principles of the love of Christ that undergirded the lesson. I was stunned—so was everyone else in the room. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t the teacher that day. Out of the mouths of babes...sometimes we hear God’s voice speaking to us.

What God says in the dark and what’s whispered for us to proclaim is a call to listen and discern. And when we hear it, when we hear the voice of God in the voices of the people around us, we proclaim it too. Or when we hear a cry from the people that is a call to God, then we bring it into the light.

I think that’s one of the things that’s going on in our country right now. The voices of many people, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, all ethnicities, are speaking out words in the streets. They call for justice. They call for equality. They call to be treated with basic human dignity.

And while we have made some progress in these areas over the years, it’s pretty obvious we have a long way to go. The Church has been saying many of these things all along. Saying it but, sadly, not always living it. In fact, the Church has fallen stunningly short over the years in failing to stand up for racial justice and equality. What we hear from protestors in the streets is a cry out to God...we must listen, and discern.

When we hear all the people, we find that God is at work. Sometimes, we think that God has only us to do his work. “Our hands are the only hands God has,” we’ve heard that before. It’s a way of saying the primary way God works in the world is through the Church, through Christians. That is a true statement. God does work through the Church, the body of Christ. But it is also true that God is at work beyond us, above us, around us. Sometimes the call is to catch up to what God is doing. And how will we know what God is doing if we don’t listen to the people around us? Sometimes this is not easy or comfortable business, and here’s why:

- Sometimes, because of what we hear, we become the troublemakers.

² Karl Barth in Time Magazine, May 1, 1966, quoted in Pastor Geoff T. Sinibaldo, sinibaldo.wordpress.com, March 5, 2015, article on internet, <https://sinibaldo.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/on-barth-the-bible-and-the-newspaper/>, accessed 19 Jun 2020.

- Sometimes, when we call out injustice and oppression, when we name it for the sin it is, we become disturbers of the status quo.

This should come as no surprise. Jesus himself said he did not come to bring peace, but a sword—not a sword to destroy, not a sword to cause violence...the sword Jesus wields is the sword of God’s truth. It is to bring truth and justice to a world that needs both.

Truth and justice are the result of proclaiming in the light. Notice here that Jesus doesn’t allow us to proclaim in the darkness.

- We don’t hint at or suggest or whisper.
- We shout it out.
- We must be confident in the truth that comes from God.

We have to be sure of what we proclaim.

And this is what we proclaim: That Jesus Christ came in the flesh to suffer and die for our sins, and God raised him from the dead, so that we might be forgiven and have eternal life with God.

That’s the Gospel in a nutshell. Christ died for us, so that we can live. Does what we proclaim match the God Jesus shows us? Is the sword we wield a sword of our frustration and our anger and our prejudice, or is it the sword of Christ’s truth?

We have to be committed to Christ, above all else. ABOVE ALL ELSE. Jesus said: “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” That may be a hard word to hear, especially on a day like Father’s Day or Mother’s Day. Think about that for a moment and let it sink in. Jesus above all things, above all parties, above all earthly “isms,” above all earthly relationships...

You see, above all our pet projects is the Jesus project—the redemption of the world. But, good news: This doesn’t mean we stop loving our earthly fathers and mothers. This isn’t a competition. We aren’t measuring how much we love and who we love more. Instead, we’re realizing that our love for fathers and mothers and anyone is complete only when we love like Christ loved. That was the command Jesus gave, you know: “Love one another, as I have loved you.” When we love Christ first, then we are enabled to love others more, including our parents, families, friends. Accepting Christ’s transforming love equips us and transforms us, so that we can love others.

All things of the spirit take time—and God transforming us is a work of the Spirit. We have to grow into the way of loving like God loves. We can talk about many practices that help us grow in love. But one practice we clearly need to develop is to **open our ears and hear all the people.**

You’ve probably heard the saying about how God gave us two ears and one mouth, which means we ought to listen twice as much as we speak. I think that’s good advice for our time, and any time. Who’s got your ear? Who do you listen to? Listen to Jesus, the one who saw all the people, who heard all the people and responded by loving all the people.

Amen.