



“One Voice Only”

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Did you happen to catch the story on the news this past week? It was about two teenagers who were swimming off the coast of Saint Augustine in Florida. They got caught in a rip current that you often experience on the east coast, and it swept them out to sea. In fact, it swept them out for a full 90 minutes! They struggled against the current, tried to swim with it (as we're told to do), but nothing seemed to happen; but the current washed them after two full miles off the coast of Florida.

After an hour and a half, they were almost completely ready to give up. They had almost no energy left, as you could imagine. The temperature of their bodies was dipping down to a type of hypothermia, as they'd been in the water for so long that they just didn't have much strength or ability to keep going. So they did what I think every one of us would have done: they prayed.

Just as they said “amen”, a 50-foot sailboat came motoring along. The water was too choppy and the wind was too strong to really sail that day, and the captain even later reported that he had thought about not even going out on the water that day because things were so rough. He's motoring two miles from shore, and he hears the faintest sound, like human voices crying out at sea. It was a strange sound to him, because you don't expect to hear human voices crying two miles offshore. He looked around and spotted two teenagers bobbing in the water, flailing and trying to get the sailors' attention.

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It took a little time to turn around to these young people, and he kept losing sight of them because the water would crest and then trough. By the time they found them, the two teenagers were soaking wet and so cold that they could barely pull themselves into the boat. The captain and the crew laid down on the deck in this choppy water and pulled the two teenagers onto the deck. They felt like dead weight, 170-pound sponges. After they pulled them up and the boat settled, they told the captain he was the answer to their prayers. They had prayed that someone would rescue them, and sure enough, he had come along. The teens started to cry when he told them the name of his boat.

It was called “The Amen”.

The word we conclude our prayers with. “Amen.” The kids had prayed and The Amen had rescued them. You can’t convince me that God’s hand isn’t involved in that in some mysterious way, that God is still active in the world and alive and well and doing these amazing things in our lives, blessing us with hope and promise.

I tell you, I was so moved by that story that, of course, I had to share it; but it reminded me of the most important lessons of our faith. We believe, as people of faith, that God hears us when we cry out for him. We’re not crying out to the abyss, we’re not crying out to just nobody, and we’re not crying out to just anybody – we’re crying out in faith to God, and when we do, we believe God hears us. In fact, that’s what the Scripture says: “Anything we ask in faith, God hears us.” Jesus said, “I know them, and because I know them, they follow me.” God can pick up the sound of a voice in a crowded world just as much as mothers and fathers can pick up the sound of their own children in a noisy, crowded, and chaotic room.

Trusting that God hears us when we cry out is a very big part of our faith. But the other side of our faith is maybe just a little harder for us to grasp. It’s not just that God hears us; the harder part of faith is perhaps learning to hear God. To discipline ourselves through worship and Bible study and prayer, week after week and day after day so we

can tune our hearts as well as our ears to the voice of God. You have to admit it's hard to hear God's voice speaking in the world today, amidst the chopping, rising sea of facts and alternative facts, of truth and truthiness, of information, misinformation, and even misguided information. All of it is eager to be sorted out, processed, with decisions to be made about whether to discard it, apply it, or not to apply it.

In the year 2010, Eric Schmidt (the former CEO of Google) was speaking a tech conference in California. He said that every two days, the world generates as much information as the world had generated since the dawn of time up to that time. Every two days! As much as the world has created every day since the dawn of time! Consider this: that was 2010 – almost a full decade ago!

Consider how much information we're generating today, sharing and resharing, posting and reposting, tweeting and retweeting. Think about the amount of information that we have to deal with on a daily basis, and never mind how many times a day we're checking our email, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, and the fact that we carry with us all the time an information machine: our smartphones. When you consider how much they're invading our lives, I'm not sure of how "smart" they are at all; they just bring us more and more information to be dealt with.

Of course, this isn't even counting the swamp of rumor and gossip that comes at us each and every day. Well-meaning friends and colleagues gossip about the boss or the teacher, or even about one another. "Did you see what she was wearing on Friday night? Did you see who he was talking to on Sunday? Do you know who I saw doing the walk of shame on Sunday morning, walking through downtown Cleveland?" No wonder the apostle Paul called the tongue "a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it, we can either bless or curse."

Even if we manage somehow to get all those external voices in check, every one of us is still confronted by inner voices. Voices of doubt, voices of temptation, voices of lust

and greed and desire for more, more money, more wealth, more power, more love. All day every day, our voracious ego is shouting, “FEED ME, SEYMOUR!”

Underneath it all, there is a Whisper with a capital W, a small, still voice as quiet as our own hearts beating. It is calm, it is still, as our own breath breathing. Sometimes the voice sounds like the longing for peace that we experience, that makes us restless in the night, peace for our lives, peace for this world. Sometimes the voice sounds like a gentle knowing, like when we see an older couple sitting together closely at the park bench – a gentle knowing of love that draws a thing of beauty from our breath. Sometimes that voice sounds like our inner restlessness for justice. “This can’t be right. We need to do something! We need to stand up! We need to speak out.” And sometimes that voice sounds like the cry of one in need, like the least among us. The cry of hunger, the cry of poverty. Sometimes it’s the literal cry of two teenagers who have been swept out to sea.

That voice, that Whisper with a capital W, is the voice of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd calling to us. The voice of the Good Shepherd cuts through the din, calms the clatter, settles the seas, reverses the racket, tames the tumult... choose whatever alliteration you’d like. Jesus isn’t just a voice; Jesus is THE voice, and it speaks to us not so much in a shout or a blast like some TV or radio ad screaming out for our attention. No, Jesus’s voice is more like a sighing breath that says to each and every one of us, “be still. Trust me. I’m with you.” His voice is not one of judgement but of grace, not one of anger but of peace. It’s a voice that says, “I am the Good Shepherd, and I will lead you beside still waters, to green pastures – not just to life, but to life in abundance, to the fullness of things that are good.”

It’s not a surprise that Jesus would call himself the Good Shepherd, or that his followers might know him and respond to his voice above all other voices the way sheep might know the shepherd’s voice and respond to it above all others. The children themselves have said, “In Jesus, we are saved. We find comfort and rest. In Jesus, we have no want. The Lord is my Shepherd, and I shall not want.” There’s none of that inner

compulsion or inner voices screaming, no voracious ego crying out to be fed because there is no want.

Did you notice Jesus doesn't want himself being compared to a high figure in his world, or even ours? Jesus doesn't call himself the good king, or the good monarch. He didn't say, "I'm the good president". He didn't say, "Together we're better, follow me and we'll make the flock great again." Jesus isn't a person of campaign promises or slogans; in fact, Jesus identifies himself with one of the most humble of vocations: a lowly shepherd, the one who is powerless in the world. Shepherds don't own the flock, or even own the land upon which the flock grazes. They don't own anything! They are servants who work for a master, and yet it is their voice that the sheep trust. It's their voice that the sheep know. It's their voice that they follow. And why? Because the Good Shepherd is the only one who will lay his life down for the sheep. The masters won't do that. The masters will let them roam and be lost. But the Shepherd will give his life for the.

It's also not surprising that Jesus compares us, his church, to sheep. I know some people are uncomfortable with that, and that some people accuse Christians of being a bunch of sheep, being led around by some antiquated shepherd from days gone by. But think about it: sheep are really good at congregating together just like we are. They know how to stick together in times of trouble and danger. I had a friend from South Africa who dealt with a lot of sheep and sheep-herding, and he told me some interesting things about them. Sheep are really good at huddling together in times of danger. They form a circle with their heads in the center with their heads bowed down, like in prayer. What they're really doing is protecting their throats. They sit in a circle and put their heads down so a wolf or a coyote or some sort of animal wanting to attack them can't grab them by the throat.

But it's not only a defensive stance; it's also an offensive one. When they gather in a circle and say this little prayer, "Lord, protect us, amen", their butts are sticking out. Because their butts are sticking out, they can kick harder at attackers. They can kick

together at attackers. They can help push the wolf or coyote away with those strong rear kicks they can offer when they've gathered in a circle. I don't think it's a bad metaphor for us as a church, and while scientists and farmers tell us that sheep have bad visual depth perception, their hearing is remarkable. They have an ability to distinguish certain sounds, amplify them, and hone in on them, particularly the voice of their shepherd. They can hear their shepherd's voice above all other noises in the wild. They know how to tune in and hear the voice of the shepherd.

Tuesday night, Beth and I had had a couple of bad days. It was the cloudy days we were having here in Cleveland, and thinking about how we wanted to see some sunshine. We were also thinking about how we were serving God's purpose in our lives. Are we doing the right thing? Are we living out God's call for us, never mind our own sense of purpose and the things we feel called to be doing? We did what most couples do when you're not so sure what you're doing in your life: we said, "Let's go for a walk." Walking is very good, isn't it? Good for your body, good for your soul.

As we started walking along and talking about some of the heaviness we were feeling in our hearts and our thoughts and starting to breathe in the fresh air, we saw a woman coming out of one of the business towers downtown and walking across a sidewalk and getting into a vehicle. It looked like someone was picking her up from work (even though it looked like she was working late, as it was about seven o'clock in the evening), and as she's getting the car, she turns and looks at Beth's lovely coat. She turned around and said, "What a lovely coat". Beth smiled and I smiled, and then she looked at me and said, "You're the pastor of the Old Stone Church, aren't you?" I'm thinking that she's seen one of our inspirational moments on Channel 3, but she came over and shook our hands and said, "You might recognize me as the woman who sits in the pew of your church and cries a lot these days. I was there on Ash Wednesday, and I was there for your Good Friday service. I hung on every word of your Good Friday service." And then she started telling her story of why she was crying a lot these days, and why it was so important that Beth and I were here, and how important it was that the old Stone Church was here and open for her in downtown Cleveland so that she could have a place to

come and sit and pray and listen and cry and do all the good stuff we need to do from time to time.

Then came time for hugs and handshakes, and Beth and I said goodnight to her and her husband. As we walked along, Beth and I both had a big sigh, just a knowing that God had just spoken to us. We heard God's voice loudly and clearly, that we were right where we needed to be. Beth and I reached out and we just silently held each other's hands and walked with a kind of peace, because we had heard the voice of the Good Shepherd affirming us and reminding us that we were right where we needed to be.

I'm not saying you need to plug your ears in order to hear the voice of god. I'm not asking you to quit listening to the world around you. You know me well enough by now to know I believe to be a Christian is to be in conversation with the world around us. But I also want to say that to be a Christian, we also have to be in conversation with God. We need to be listening through the filter of faith. We need to listen for God through our ears and with our hearts wide open. Last Sunday, I asked you to keep your eyes open to the places that the risen Christ is revealing God's truth in this world and in your life. This week, I want to encourage you to keep your ears open and your hearts open and listen to God's voice underneath all other voices, in the midst of all other voices, and above all those other voices. I want to ask you, to challenge you to find moments where you can be still in order to listen. Take a cell phone Sabbath one afternoon a week, or, if you can, one day a week. Limit your Facebook and other social media times. Tune out, if you can, the world for a moment so that you might tune in and turn on to God.

I shared with some of you not too long ago about how I was elected to be a delegate at the General Council of the United Church of Canada. It's the congress of the church, basically, just like the General Assembly is the congress of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. It's a time where you get to go and debate the issues of the church and you get to argue about and hopefully pass some law and make statements that impact the church and impact the nation. Every morning, we would gather in this great arena in New Brunswick, and we'd come into this great arena buzzing about the activities of the

former day and other meetings that would happen through the week and which discussions were happening (and which way we'd vote on this issue and that issue). We do politics well in the church, don't kid yourself. That's why our form of government here in the U.S. was formed based on the Presbyterian Church. We'd come into this arena, and sometimes we'd forget we were Christians and people of God, and sometimes we'd forget to hear God's voice.

So we'd begin each day with worship. Thousands of people gathered set to do politics, and we'd start with worship. I remember how it started, and it stands out for me more than anything else after all these years: the worship leader got up on the stage, and they didn't tap the mic and ask us to take our seats or ask us to settle down. None of that! The worship leaders would get up on the stage and one person would get up to the microphone and begin singing the words of Psalm 46:10: "Be still, be still, be still and know that I am God. For I am exalted in the nations and on earth; be still and know that I am God." One by one, people started to get still. Some moved and took their seats, others moved toward the worship platform and held hands. But everyone started singing! That whole room had been stilled of all the restlessness and the politicking, and our hearts and ears and our devotions were becoming in tune to God's voice.

Friends, we live in an era of facts and alternative facts, of truth and truthiness, and information, misinformation, and even misguided information. We live lives overwhelmed by the noise of our voracious egos, crying out to be fed. But underneath it all and within it all and above it all, there is a small, still voice. One voice, and one voice only. It is the voice of the Good Shepherd. I pray that we are tuning our hearts and our lives to listen for His voice, that we are able to hear it clearly enough that we can follow.

Praise be to God. Amen.