

Wesley United Methodist Church                      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
May 12, 2019 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Title: Listen to Me  
Scripture: Acts 9:36-43  
John 10:22-30

“Use your listening ears.” I would be rich if I had a dollar for every time I have said that. I really don’t remember if I said that to my children, or if I just went with the simpler – “Listen to me.” But I know I have said it thousands of times to my grandchildren. It’s usually said by the parents when they will be alone with me. “Be good for Nana, Use your listening ears.” Or I say it when there are other things more attractive than hearing what I have to say. It means, “Pay attention. Listen to me.”

I wonder how many times God says that to me and I fail to hear. There are times when I’m focused on what I’m doing, or what I want to be doing and I need to be reminded to listen. There are times when I don’t really want to hear what God is saying because I want to hear something else. There are even times when I want to hear what God is saying, but something seems to be preventing me from really listening, really hearing what God is trying to say to me.

There are times when I’m having a conversation with someone else when it seems like we are talking past each other. We might keep repeating the same thing, trying to explain what we are saying, but it seems clear that the other person isn’t really hearing what I’m saying. And probably, if I’m really honest, I am not doing the best job of listening to the other person either. We both know what we want to say, and what we want to hear, and it seems that what we are hearing is something very different.

There are times when I've been struggling with a tough decision, seeking God's guidance, and feel like I'm not getting it. At some of those times, I've been known to say, "I wish God would just hit me over the head with a two by four, or, "I wish God used neon signs to get my attention."

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who for whom this is true. Or, at least, I hope I'm not the only one who sometimes finds myself in these situations.

In my experience, God seldom uses the 2 by 4 or the neon sign, but God is still speaking even when I don't seem to be doing a good job of listening. I wonder how many times, God wants to say to me, "Stop. Take a breath. Empty your mind of preconceived ideas, and simply listen with an open heart, with an open mind."

So, despite my difficulty in listening sometimes, there are other times when my hearing is absolutely at its best. There were situations that were true when my children were or now with my grandchildren when my ability and instinct to hear is little top notch. Put me in a room with a lot of children and I will immediately be able to tell when it is my grandchild who is calling me, or who is crying, or laughing. On a busy playground with many children, I can tell you at any moment, exactly where my grandchild is. There's something about that relationship that keeps me tuned in, keeps me attentive, keeps me aware.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." I hear my grandchildren's voices. I know them, and probably I follow them more than they follow me. But wouldn't it be wonderful if I were equally as good at hearing Jesus' voice and following him. To live for Jesus is to Listen to Jesus and I expect that all of us could be better at doing that.

Part of the problem is that Jesus doesn't always answer questions the way we would like; the way we want him to. On those occasions when I watch a congressional hearing or testimony, or listen to a press conference, one of the things that strikes me the most is how often the questions and answers do not seem to go together. There are many times when I've heard the questioner insist on a simple "yes or no" answer and the respondent always wants to clarify the answer and frequently focus on something else.

That happens a lot with questions we ask, and it can be very frustrating; especially when we have decided ahead of time what the answer should be, or the way we want the question answered. It happened in today's Gospel reading when people gathered around Jesus and asked, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." They want what they believe should be a simple "yes or no" answer but that's not what they get.

This is one of those no-win situations. If Jesus had answered either "yes" or "no" he would have been in trouble. If he said, "yes" then some of them would have accused him of heresy. In fact, immediately after today's reading, that's exactly what happened and some of them picked up stones to try to kill him.

If he had said, "no" they probably would have thought he was wasting their time and they would have left. And, since we believe he is the Messiah, then he would have been lying. Neither answer would have satisfied them. Instead, Jesus says that he has already answered this question by his actions. He professes that he is doing God's work and that his actions have been clear.

Part of this gets confusing because of the assumptions about what the Messiah would be or do. Remember that on Palm Sunday, those who were looking for a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman Government threw palm branches in front of him and shouted, “Hosanna, Save us!” But Jesus didn’t overthrow the Roman government. He was not the kind of Messiah that many were expecting.

Instead of answering the question following their expectations of a simple yes or no, Jesus reminds them of what he has been doing. They needed to let go of what they wanted to hear and listen to what Jesus is really saying, and what he is really doing.

Jesus’ actions speak and testify to who he is. His actions show that he is doing the work that God sent him to do. Jesus’ work cannot be separated from the work of God.<sup>i</sup> Our actions speak loudly in identifying who we are and what we really believe. When I tell a grandchild to use his listening ears, what I am saying is, “show me, by your actions, that you are paying attention.” Jesus’ actions bear witness to who he is.

On this side of the resurrection, we can proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah. We have a rather complicated doctrine called the Trinity, that says that somehow God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are one and yet three. And quite frankly, you can drive yourself crazy if you try to really explain that. The good news is that we don’t really have to be able to explain it, to believe it, just as we don’t need to be able to explain how the Internet works to know that it does. There are some things that we can believe even though we cannot explain them.

But, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection convince us that Jesus is more than just a good teacher and leader. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection give him an authority that a good teacher and leader do not

have. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God has claimed us. We belong to God and no one can change that. My children are my children, and my grandchildren are my grandchildren no matter what happens in their lives or in mine. No one can change that, and we are talking about a human relationship with limitations. This is so much truer when we speak about a relationship with God. God has claimed us. We belong to God and no one can change that.<sup>ii</sup>

In baptism, we accept that relationship for ourselves or for children who are not yet ready to make that acceptance for themselves. In baptism, we proclaim as a congregation that God has claimed this person, and all of us, as God's children. We proclaim that God is working in the life of the person who has been baptized. We reaffirm that God has been and is working in our lives – even in those times when we have been unfaithful.

William Willimon wrote a book about baptism that has an affirmation of this that I have valued for many years. He wrote, "I do not always feel like a child of God. God knows I do not always act like a child of God! But I am. I am one of God's children not because of what I did or because of who I am but because God chose me, out of all the universe, to be his child. I am owned. When I am anxious or alone or defeated, baptism ought to speak a firm word of comfort to me: `Relax, be calm. You did not choose me, I chose you.'"<sup>iii</sup>

God chose each and every one of us to be God's child. God claims us as God's children and loves us just because. Jesus came to teach us and remind us of this and in his life, death, and resurrection has claimed us. Jesus continues to speak to us today reminding us to "use your listening ears" and pay attention. Jesus' actions testified to who he was and reminds us that our actions should also testify to who we are.

We would do well to ask ourselves, how our works communicate our identity and our discipleship and to ask God to help us bring our actions and our words into closer alignment so that they witness to God's call in each of our lives.

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<sup>i</sup> Lockhart-Gilroy, Annie [www.gbod.org/worship](http://www.gbod.org/worship) Easter season Living: Listen

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Willimon, William H. Remember Who You Are: Baptism a model for Christian Life, p.41