

“Hearing God’s Voice in Unexpected Places”

Mark 4:26-34

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A few weeks ago I was on my way to visit someone in the hospital; I had time for just a short lunch, so I stopped by Promenade Mall to get a “gourmet meal” at the food court there at the mall. After going to Chick-fil-A and partaking of that wonderful lunch, I was leaving the mall and going down the escalator when I heard someone say, “Kipp?” Excuse me, but when that kind of thing happens I wonder if it might be God calling me. I turned around and much to my (I don’t want to say dismay), but much to my surprise it was Betsi Phillips, not God. I was going down the “down” escalator and she was going up the “up” escalator. I said hi to Betsi and that was about it. You know sometimes you see in a movie the hero jumps over the escalator –but there was no way I was going to do that.

We should not be surprised if God would speak to us through another person. That’s how God nearly always speaks to us. I don’t know how many of you have seen some kind of handwriting on the wall or heard a voice from heaven or seen some miraculous pattern in the clouds, but usually when God speaks to us it is through another person. We should not be surprised about that. If it seems strange to us, our scripture lesson might even seem stranger.

I said at the first service that this scripture would not make most persons’ greatest hits list—at least a part of the scripture. A couple of people at the first service raised their hand and said indeed the mustard seed parable is one of their favorite parables, but the first parable we know hardly anything about. It is a story about trusting God to give growth. We plant the seed in the ground, and then just leave the rest to God. Thomas Long said this is an example of our faith *in* someone. We don’t have faith *that* something will happen; our faith primarily is in someone. Our faith is in God.

Then we do have the wonderful story about the mustard seed; mustard seed faith that we all need. It is interesting to me that long before the We Would Be Building program or What Would Jesus Do bracelets there were little necklaces, clear drops, with a mustard seed inside. Do any of you remember those necklaces? I remember as a young child seeing those mustard seed drop necklaces and being fascinated because I had heard the story about the mustard seed. Here was this tiny seed; Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

Does that make sense in a world where we like big things? We like big cars and trucks, don't we? We like big houses. Suzanne and I were riding last night through a neighborhood several miles down south of Tulsa. I was amazed at the size of some of these houses. They were more like castles than houses. We could tell by the age of some of the people in the yards at these houses that only two people lived in some of these houses. It was big enough if you turned it into an apartment to house 20 or 30 people, huge houses. We like big cars, trucks, and houses, so we like big incomes to pay for our big cars, trucks, and houses.

In the church we like big things, don't we? We like to say, "There was a big crowd at church today." We like big buildings; we like our ministers to have a big voice . . . big crowd, big building, big voice. We like *big* in the church. But Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a teensy, tiny little mustard seed. In matters of faith, maybe there are times when smaller is better.

I know some of you have heard Fred Craddock speak in person; some of you have only read his books. If you have not seen him in person, you might be surprised to know that Fred Craddock is just a little bitty guy. He's maybe 5' 4" tall. He has a little bitty squeaky voice. He doesn't have an impressive "stained glass" voice. Fred himself said his voice is like a gentle breeze going through a fence post; nothing big about it at all. In matters of faith, maybe big isn't always best.

What we need to be careful about when we are listening for God's voice is to realize that there are all kinds of competing voices. Some of them as sweet and smooth as honey on a hot biscuit, trying to sell us all kinds of things we don't need; Sham Wows, snuggie blankets, topsy turvey tomatoes; smooth, sweet talkers.

Other competing voices are not so sweet. In fact, they are strident, as irritating as fingernails on a chalkboard; fear mongers, hate mongers, war mongers, voices competing that sometimes get in the way of hearing God's voice.

It should not surprise us that God often chooses to speak to us through other people, through other voices. When Carol speaks to you and asks for help for some kind of outreach project, that might be God speaking to you. If Beverly addresses us and says something about a need for the children's ministry, it might be God speaking to us. When Jeremy challenges us to do things to help the youth, it might be God speaking through Jeremy.

In the next few weeks we will be doing some things as a result of our We Would Be Building projects in the area of evangelism. Charles Hargrove will be speaking to you about evangelism and asking for your help in that area. It might not be just Charles asking; it might be God speaking through Charles. Now, if you were asking Mary Ann if it were God's voice speaking through Charles . . . you'll have to get her a copy of this sermon, Charles, so she can read this for herself!

You see, that's the real trick. Are you able to hear God's voice in the voices of those closest to you like your spouse, your children, your parents, your crazy brother-in-law? Are you able to hear God's voice in those voices?

Some women might say, "Are you kidding me? All my husband ever does is complain. How could I hear God's voice in his voice?"

Or a man might say, "Have you ever heard my wife when she starts nagging? If that's how God sounds, maybe I need to be an atheist."

Of course, the challenge for us is not only to hear God's voice in the voices of those closest to us, but to let others hear God's voice through our voice; in our kind and caring words in unexpected times in unexpected places.

A couple of weeks ago, Suzanne and I were in the downtown Tulsa area on a Saturday evening. I believe I might have heard God's voice that evening. I was surprised. There was a parade and I saw several church vans. At first I thought it might have been some kind of religious parade, but when I saw what was happening, I knew that was not the case. Those persons in the parade were carrying a huge rainbow-colored flag and the persons who were in the church vans were off to the side carrying signs. The signs basically said "If you're marching in this parade, you might as well be marching straight to hell."

I have never seen such an angry group of people in my life as I did those people who were holding the signs. As we turned around to leave, I looked to see on the sides of those church vans what kind of churches they were from. I couldn't tell for sure, but I think I could read on one of them "First Church of the Pharisees."

You know something I've never understood? There was one group for whom Jesus reserved his harshest criticism. He detested the Pharisees. We still have a significant segment of the church that tries to reenact what the Pharisees did. I will never understand that. There was anger in that group, anger that was frightening, to be honest. You know what was missing? Where was the joy? Jesus said, "I came that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be full. There was no joy in that group. Where was the love in the group holding the signs? Jesus calls us, challenges us to be loving persons. That is the best way others can hear God's voice through us, but I saw no love in that group.

Several years ago I subscribed to something called the Yokefellow

Newsletter. It was published quarterly; the author was Elton Trueblood. Some of you might recognize that name. Elton Trueblood was a giant in Christianity in the 20th century. I looked forward once a quarter to get a copy of that Yokefellow Newsletter because I knew that Trueblood would have something inspiring to read. The last copy of the newsletter I received included these words:

“At the age of 93 I am well aware that I do not have many years to live. Consequently, I try very hard to live my remaining years in such a manner that I will make a real difference in as many lives as possible. How do I want to be remembered? Not primarily as a Christian Scholar, but rather as a loving person. This can be the goal of every Christian. If I can be remembered as a truly loving person, I shall be satisfied.”

A few months after Trueblood wrote these words, he did die. He didn't have a few years to live, he had a few months. Two years ago on the second Sunday of June, I stepped into this pulpit for the first time. In some ways, Tom Rorschach, it doesn't seem like a day over 24 months, does it? Two years—time really does fly when you're having fun. It's hard for me to believe in some ways that two years have gone by that rapidly. That first Sunday I told a story of an old minister, who every Sunday carried a card into the pulpit with him. He would tape it onto the pulpit as a reminder. Written on the card were the words, “Let them see God.” In honor of today's scripture, I would say, “Let them hear God.” Let them hear God in our acts and words of kindness, caring, compassion and love. Amen.