

BE STILL, BE SPEECHLESS
Romans 12: 1-8 and Matthew 16: 13-20
August 23, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

At SYW many years ago, we asked a young lady to share her gift of dance, particularly ballet, during worship. We began the service with Stephen Curtis Chapman's version of "Be Still and Know." Close eyes and envision graceful, spirit-filled movements as you listen to these lyrics:

*Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am holy.
Be still oh, restless soul of mine. Bow before the Prince of Peace.
Let the noise and clamor cease.
Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am faithful.
Consider all that I have done stand in awe and be amazed and know that I will never change.
Be still, be speechless.
Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know I am your Maker.
Come rest your head upon my chest.
Listen to the rhythm of my unfailing heart of love beating
for my little ones calling each of you to come.
Be still, be still, be speechless.*

This remains one of those holy moments when I felt the Spirit deep in my soul, especially when Alaina simply touched her face and gently turned it toward heaven. Using our bodies, another form of prayer, for sure.

It is Paul who urges the Christian Romans to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, prodding them to move toward a deeper dancing, if you will, of prayer beyond mere words. Paul urges worship and service with our whole bodies, inside and out, whether that be our individual bodies or our bodies collectively as the church, the body of Christ.

Paul's pleads for each of us to put our whole selves into our relationship with God and each other. Only being intellectual Christians will not cut it. Our response is not meant to be passive, but participatory with physical actions, attitudes, words, and emotions. That kind of all-in worship, Paul says, comes from a gratitude-filled life for God's love; the kind of gratitude that, yes, can call for sacrifice. Somehow sacrificing, as in burnt offerings, that lead to death do not seem to square with "living sacrifice." Of course, we know that Paul is speaking of a different kind of dying. We are to die to self-centeredness, leaving behind our old life without Christ, and in turn live in the power of God that draws us into a deeper unity with Jesus. That is what makes it a relationship more like Peter's, one built on a rock-solid foundation. A connection better Peter, the Lord, and the church that Barbara Brown Taylor describes this way:

If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for all of us. Peter remains God's chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block, and shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness—that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time than we fall.

Peter is the living example of Paul's preaching. Peter is, eventually, willing to risk his life in order to know Jesus more fully. But it was not always that way. Sometimes it was as if Peter did not know Jesus at all.

Envision the disciples standing around looking at, listening for, and waiting on Jesus to do or say something. Matthew's gospel makes it clear that while the disciples, and Peter in particular, participated in Jesus mission; much of the time, they were observers, students soaking in all that Jesus is teaching them. They witnessed Jesus healing bodies. They felt gratitude as Jesus made well the hearts of others. They watched as he cast out demons. They listened to his parables and struggled with their human minds to understand the meaning behind them. They stood by as Jesus spoke his mind to religious and political authorities. They were awed with the compassion of Jesus as he gave attention to those the rest of the world would rather ignore. Perhaps the disciples were not as active in the ministry of Jesus, at least not to this point, but surely the activity of Jesus served as the truth to who Jesus was.

So, if we are taking Matthew at his word, then there should have been no hesitation on the part of Peter to answer with confidence the question Jesus point blank asks him: who do you say that I am? And yet, Matthew shares that it was easier for Jesus students to tell him who "other" people thought he was. Obviously, they had been listening to the word on the street and so they recite the list they have collected. People say you are: John the Baptist or Elijah. Others say you are Jeremiah, and a few just call you a prophet in general. Easy peezy answers...because, they did not have to reveal any of their own hearts.

Before I sound smug, I have a confession. Sometimes the liturgy, the "words of worship" if you will, roll off my tongue before passing through my heart. There are times when the Lord's Prayer or the Doxology or our long-standing affirmations become just that...words. I find myself, at times, practicing intentionality with these letters that morph into words that become sentences by wrapping them around the convictions of my heart and head. I have memorized the words. I can repeat them minus print in the bulletin, well, sometimes I do forget. But, what Jesus is asking of Peter, what Paul is preaching, and what is being ask of me and you is that beyond the words, our hearts have been so transformed that our living is witness even without our speaking.

So, who knows? Maybe Peter knows who the Lord is, but it takes that extra bit of intentionality for him to realize Jesus is not looking for a memorized line or a crowd response. Jesus wants Peter, the rock, to stand firm in his own belief and put that belief into words.

On the occasions when the words pop out without fully grasping their power, I find myself later asking, "Did I miss an opportunity to fully confess, fully affirm, fully invest my trust with my whole being that Jesus is my Rock and Savior, as Paul would say. Let me be clear. Collectively affirming our faith, confessing our sin, receiving God's forgiveness, offering our thanksgiving is soul-filling. But, when Jesus asks of me, who do "you" say I am, I suspect he wants a little more than a pre-printed affirmation, as vital as that is.

And Peter is clear, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” His clarity is reason for hope for us folk who are the stumbling, bumbling followers of Jesus. Despite human limitations, God works in Peter in ways never imagined, and so too can work in and through us. And it is also hope for us in that our faithful following, even clueless stepping-out at times, catches Jesus’ attention and blessing. To Peter he says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

And it is with other vessels, with us, that God continues to build up the church. We are vessels set apart, made holy, consecrated for the purpose of God. Set apart not because of who we are but because of who God is. We are not working to up the perfection in us, rather God is creating that perfection in us empowering us to love as Christ loved. That pleases God.

This fumbling, bumbling, doubting, scared disciple was the one whom Jesus blessed as an expression of the church’s faith. Peter’s future leadership in the early church was far from perfect. He kept messing up; and yet, the one thing he forever got right: his confession of Jesus as his Lord and Savior was more than words on parchment or recited in worship gatherings. Peter’s confession uttered fully from the heart shaped his whole life; it transformed who he was and how he lived. By the mercy of the Lord, not Peter’s ability to please, his life was transformed from the inside out.

Speaking of inside-out, a little boy was trying to open a flower bud. Under his persistent efforts the blossom fell apart in his hands. In exasperation he looked up at his mother and asked, “Why does the bud fall apart when I try to open it, but when God opens it the flower is beautiful? His mother was speechless and before she could say anything, he said eagerly: Oh, I know. When God opens the flower, he opens it up from the inside!

To be conformed is to be forced into someone else’s personhood or group identity from the outside. Being transformed opens us up from the inside, and as with the flower, the result is dramatic! When God opens persons from the inside, we can be the uniquely gifted individuals we were created to be. To be transformed by the love of God in Christ brings hope.

Paul is urging the Christians, living in what seemed to them a hopeless world, to keep holding on to faith, to keep struggling together, to live as Jesus taught them to live. Living as he lived, Paul preached creates such a powerful change that outside forces do not stand a chance of squeezing us into their mold. to live out what they say they believe... together, in community, enabling them to work together to resist the strong pressures that surround us.

Knowing that we were created with a unique shape, a rock or other kind of vessel, both Peter and Paul, invite us into the Spirit’s continuing state of transformation, and into intentionality about affirming with our whole being who Jesus is to and for us, and what that means for us as part of God’s larger world. That desire to know God’s will for our lives gives us the confidence to live from the inside out!

God’s will is perfect. We are not. Human perfection is not what God seeks. God seeks our willingness to and our movement toward God’s plan for our lives. That pleases God.

In Christian community we search for ways both to change things and to support one another in ups and downs of change. The greatest hope we can give to all struggling to find God's will, in the midst of change, is to stand beside them in the struggle, to offer them the Lord's words of hope, and comfort and to surround them with God's love by way of our love. Then, God's good and perfect will transform us from the inside out. How?

By our willingness, you, me, and all of us, as the living body of Christ, to rest in those moments of being still and knowing God.

By our willingness to rest in the moments of listening for God's lasting Word that transforms us from the inside out.

By our willingness to find rest in those moments of our being still and being speechless.