

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Finding Your Voice”
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May 20, 2018

John 15:26-16:15

These verses from John are categorized as Jesus’ goodbye. We have just come out of the Easter season, so who know why Jesus is saying goodbye, but this was not clear to the disciples. In the chapters before this scene the disciples are obviously confused, they ask all sorts of questions “What do you mean you are going away? Where are you going?” normal questions to ask someone who starts saying goodbye, but you didn’t know they were leaving. The disciples are distressed by the answers Jesus gives, “I am going to my father, I have been with you for awhile but soon will not be with you”. They become so stressed out they stop asking questions because they simply cannot handle the answers. They don’t want to think of a time where Jesus is not there to lead them.

Jesus does all he can to help his disciples through the transition, he reassures them that they will not be left alone for long. Jesus tells his disciples he will send them an advocate, the Spirit, to get them through the journey ahead. Jesus does not sugar coat the journey ahead. He is honest with them about the way the world will treat them and the struggles that they will face. Knowing his disciples will face rejection and death Jesus understands this is still the best way forward.

In fact, Jesus says they should be happy he is leaving because it means the advocate is able to come to them and begin its work. Until now the disciples have been followers, students, learning what it means to be God’s People from Jesus. Jesus was at the lead, Jesus was the one teaching and talking, it was Jesus’ voice that carried the message for the community. The community that was building was centered on Jesus, but something else was happening too. They were caring for one another, looking out for the vulnerable among them, welcoming the outsider. They were becoming the city on a hill Jesus spoke about.

Community was not a new concept to anyone who followed Jesus. In this time, community was a survival technique. Everyone operated within a community of either religious affiliation or family circles or a regional tribe. People were skeptical of the outsider, they shunned those within the community who did not meet their standards. There is a popular poster online with two children from very different ethnic backgrounds hugging each other and the poster says, “love comes naturally, hate is learned.” I recently heard an interview with a sociologist who said this is not true. Hating the other has kept humans safe for ages. If an outsider came into your camp they weren’t coming to love you. This experience impacted the way communities acted. The traditional way of doing community was to stay together, keep outsiders out, follow the rules, and everyone is strongest when only the strong were involved.

The people who followed Jesus understood the importance of community, but Jesus challenged them to think better. To welcome in the outsider, to wrap around the people who are seen as weak and protect them. God’s community motto is we are stronger when we are inclusive. Under Jesus’ leading voice he turned the idea of community on its head and it was working. Then came the time for other voices to lead.

Jesus says to them “the spirit of truth will speak on my behalf and you also will speak up with the advocates help” he tells them they will find their own voice and it will be inspired by the spirit of truth.

They received these voices on Pentecost. With a rush of wind and tongues of fire they were literally given new voices in different languages. The Spirit found them still in community with one another, still praying, teaching, and learning together. Keeping up the new way to do community and telling the stories Jesus started. But... the spirit does not wrap them and bind them together, the spirit sits on each one individually and sets them each apart for a specific task. Their community is about to take another step. Surviving being apart but still together in spirit.

I get jealous when I read about Pentecost. I would LOVE to speak another language, I have tried a couple of times and I have a long list of excuses why it didn't work out. But it isn't even about the languages, the disciples are transformed from scared to empowered. They go from hiding in a room together for safety, to speaking eloquently in the streets about Jesus, and then heading to new lands far from their comfortable community. This thing they received from the Spirit is more than just the ability to speak in a new language. The voice they are gifted with goes beyond being bilingual. It's a confidence to speak the message they already had within them. This is what Jesus meant by it being good he was leaving so the Spirit could come and begin its work. With Jesus gone and the spirit stirring in them they finally were able to find their own voices.

When I started preschool, I loved it! I loved meeting new friends, new toys, specially packed snacks from my mom. I couldn't understand why everyone around me would cry when their parents left. First week was a dream. I quickly learned why I should be crying. My brothers were in high school when I was born so I never had to share toys, at preschool I had to share. And not only share, there were kids who were mean and wouldn't share with me. At home when I got tired I took a nap, at preschool I had to take a nap when the schedule said naptime. The world of preschool was so unfair. I was over it by week two and started screaming for my mom when she left. Of course, by week two most of the other kids had stopped screaming so I was alone in my sorrow. My mom worked in the building my preschool was in, but she knew not to turn around when I screamed. My brothers had made her a pro by the time I was born. She knew I would find something I loved and meet amazing people and learn to find my own way without her to hold my hand. She knew to become the person I needed to grow into she needed to step back. I'm sure that was excruciating for her, and she did occasionally cave. I can remember having lunch in her office and knowing I wasn't supposed to be there. But my mom knew that when she stepped back something within me would begin to shine.

This is what Jesus knows when he says goodbye to the disciples. He knows his voice has lead them long enough, and that they have learned what they need to for the moment. It is their turn to be in communion with God through the Holy Spirit and find their own God given voices... And we have that chance too. We are just as filled with that rushing wind and balancing fire as the disciples were on Pentecost.

The voice we receive from the Holy Spirit may not sound like a different language, but it does set us apart for a special task. Our voices resonate around a passion we can NOT keep silent about. That may be a special cause, or to speak for someone who is ignored. Your voice may be an ability to sit in silence with someone who is hurting or to rally the squad when a friend is in need. Our individual voices may champion different things, but they are all inspired but the same spirit of truth.

One of my favorite songs begins with the singer cursing God for not doing something to end hunger or step in the middle of abuse. The singer is furious and can not understand why God would sit back and finally cries out “why don’t you do something” God’s reply is “I did. I created you”

Our Pentecost voice is the word we were created to speak, the actions we were created to take, the places we were created to change. In this community we hear the story of God’s love and how to be God’s people. We practice it when we come together. We know it is a huge message for just one person to carry. Jesus did it well, but now it is our turn to carry it into the world.

Thankfully we do that together, each of us speaking a piece of the message that we are most gifted to tell. It is a scary thing to be charged with a piece of God’s message, but Jesus assures us we are never alone when we speak up. The spirit will guide us and help us speak the truth that needs to be heard. Our rushing wind is the sound of air filling our lungs, our tongue of fire sit in our bellies as we speak the words the spirit inspires us to say.

May you feel the spirit tugging on your heart, and may you listen to the voice inside you, may you gather the courage to stand and use your God given voice to continue the message of God’s love so that when people hear you they know you speak with the spirit of truth.