*“LISTEN!”*

A sermon preached at Springfield Presbyterian Church (USA), Sykesville, Maryland,

by the Rev. Dr. Stephen J. Price-Gibson September 12, 2021 - 10:30 am

Scripture Lessons: *Proverbs 1:20-33*; *Revelation 3:20-22*

When I first arranged to come and be with you this morning, naturally I did the 21rst Century thing and googled Sykesville. And wow, in the 2nd sentence of the Wikipedia article I learned that in a Budget Travel poll Sykesville had won the title of “Coolest Town in America.” Digging deeper, I found Sykesville beat out 2nd placed Pipestone, Minnesota by more than 20%. It beat out competitors like Taos, New Mexico and Asbury Park, New Jersey. That’s some stiff competition.

Now it so happens I’ve been to Pipestone. That’s Little House On the Prairie country. And I’ve been to Taos. That’s got art galleries and Kit Carson’s house. So I came to Sykesville, looking for the cool. And I’ve found some. That main street through the middle of town—wow! This historic church. *Very* cool.

Also cool: it says right here in the bulletin that the choir is going to sing ‘One Voice’ by Ruth Moody as an anthem. The signature song of the Wailing Jenny’s, Canada’s best reason to download the Spotify app. And you should hear what the U.S. Navy band has done with that song. I can hardly wait. I want to get this sermon out of the way as fast as I can to get to this anthem. And soon I’ll tell you why. But first, the scripture lessons.

Today’s Old Testament reading is from *Proverbs*, a book which most Biblical scholars believe was compiled about 2500 years ago, but which contains portions that go back at least another 500 years to the days of King Solomon, son of David.

It begins

*Wisdom cries out in the street;
   in the squares she raises her voice.*

*At the busiest corner she cries out;
   at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.*

What are we supposed to see here? Who is Wisdom, and what is she doing in the street, in the squares, at the busiest corner, at the city gates? It’s a scene of a busy market day in an ancient city, when the streets are filled with vendors selling fruits and fish, wool and silk, trinkets and tools. All of the vendors are trying to get the attention of the passers-by. Most have come to town to get something in particular, but the sellers are hoping to convince the buyers to go home with more than they came for.

It’s all hustle and bustle and a rich blend of shouting, sing-song, piling and dumping of goods and a constant stream of traffic. Exhilarating, but sooner or later exhausting.

And here is a woman going everywhere she can, crying out to get attention,

in order, to *not sell* what she has, but to *give it away* for free. She is like an ancient Palestinian Molly Malone, who wheels her wheelbarrow, through streets wide and narrow—but she’s not crying cockles and mussels; she’s crying

*I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you. “Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster”.*

Her name is Wisdom, and she is God’s voice to us.

As Christians we read this text through the lens of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us in *First Corinthians*:

*“[To] those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the* Wisdom *of God.”*

Christ, whose voice is the voice we must hear and recognize and follow if we are to be secure and live without dread. Jesus says, in *John*, chapter 10,

*‘the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’*

Jesus is describing the relationship of us, his flock, to him, the Good Shepherd.

The sheep are secure and without dread because they know *his* voice, and follow.

If the Bible is to serve as a practical handbook to living our best life, it is all about teaching us how to hear, recognize, and follow the voice of Jesus. Through the Scriptures and through the Spirit Jesus continues to speak to us. We live with the promise of today’s New Testament reading from the visionary Book of Revelation, written some sixty or seventy years after Jesus left this earth:

*“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”*

Jesus is saying that he will come to us wherever we are, whenever we are, and be a part of our daily life, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, mind to mind. We don’t need to find Christ. Christ has already found us. We don’t need to earn what Christ can give; what Christs gives is given freely. This is grace. This is the essence of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. All we have to do is accept what Christ offers.

But the question is, can we accept what Christ offers, if we don’t notice that it is being offered? *“Listen! IF you hear my voice, … I will come in to you.”* This is all of a piece with the presence of Wisdom in the marketplace. Together with the vision in *Revelation* they make it clear

That the voice of Jesus speaks to us in both the privacy of our homes

and in the busy actions of our life in the world. We may be in bed, we may be at work, we may be shopping, we may be at the beach, we may be in the middle of dull routine,

or we may be at one of the defining turning-point moments of life. Constantly, repeatedly, always, Wisdom cries to us. Jesus speaks to us.

What is so compelling about this image of Wisdom in an ancient, raucous marketplace is that is clearly conveys a vital truth down the centuries, to us today. Wisdom, it turns out, is not the only voice crying in the marketplace. Wisdom *has* to cry, because all the other purveyors of presumed necessities and pleasures are competing for attention.

It is an ungodly racket. No wonder it seems that so many, then as now, didn’t hear what Wisdom was offering. It’s a classic good news/bad news set-up. The good news: Wisdom says Come and get what you need for free. The bad news: most people—perhaps most of the time—and certainly all of us, much of the time, can’t hear Wisdom because we are distracted. If we are going to get what Wisdom will give us, we are going to have to learn how to recognize her voice in the midst of all the worlds din.

It’s hard to hear the voice of wisdom today. Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., a United Methodist Pastor in Charlotte, N.C.: wrote

*“Many eloquent voices make claims about how to live in the real world:*

*talk-show hosts, cultural commentators, seminar leaders, life coaches.*

*The church is but one voice among many, clamoring for attention in the marketplace.”*

And today, we might add to his list: podcasters, social media influencers, celebrities, advertisers. They all peddle some form of worldly wisdom. Here’s a pro-tip: all worldly wisdom come down to the same proposition: you’ll get what you want the most—for a price. Just buy this beauty product, put your time into these exercises, reading this management manual, give over your own judgment to that political savior, give up relating to or caring about those outsiders, those competitors, those losers. Worldly wisdom is the opposite of what Christ freely gives.

I think we all know that, as some level. We don’t need to be lectured or scolded about not being overcome by the fake wisdom of the world. Perhaps none of us would be in church, none of us would worship God, none of us would strive to be a disciple of Jesus Christ if we weren’t desperate to hear the cry of real Wisdom. What we really need is some helpful guidance, some useful ideas, about how to develop our ability to hear the voice of Christ. We’ve all heard it sometime or other. We’ve all known those moments when God is so real that we know we are secure and we can live without dread,

no matter what the world throws at us. We want some more of that. It’s often called spiritual growth or spiritual development, but it all comes down to getting better at listening for, and hearing the cry of Wisdom, the voice of Jesus.

This is why it is so cool that today’s anthem is “One Voice” by Ruth Moody. Because I don’t know a better, handier, more useful rule-of-thumb guide to how to develop our ability to recognize the cry of Wisdom, the voice of Christ. The song begins:

*This is the sound of one voice
One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice*

The key word is *choice*. Wisdom is practical and it is ethical. It speaks to what we should do, or not do, in any given moment. It a hands-on kind of understanding,

a close relation to knowledge but not quite the same things. Knowledge is about true and false. Wisdom is about right and wrong. An on-line friend of Caroline’s shared a humorous way of defining the difference:

*Knowledge is knowing that tomato is a fruit.*

*Wisdom is knowing to not put tomato into a fruit salad.*

Knowledge is about what is or isn’t so. Wisdom is about what ought or ought not to be done.

There is a classic prayer of confession that begins with the imagery of sheep who have failed to respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd, saying

*We have erred and strayed from our ways like lost sheep. …*

*We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;*

*and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.*

Who ever composed the prayer well understood that we can fail both by choosing to do the wrong thing, or, by choosing not to do the right thing. To take a common way that that I suppose each of us has been tested at some time or other, we have had the impulse to say something hurtful and spiteful about other persons or groups of people,

or we have chosen not to speak up on behalf of other persons or groups when something hateful is being said. How do we know we have passed or failed this test?

Through one voice that renders its verdict on our action or inaction: the voice of conscience. (Incidentally, my conscience tells me that my grade on this test

is somewhere between a D+ or C- at best.) For the Christian, the conscience is, if not precisely the voice of God, it is certainly the vehicle through which God communicates.

Thomas Merton, a Catholic Monk and spiritual director said *‘Conscience is the light by which we interpret the will of God in our own lives.’*

Contemporary psychology is suspicious of the conscience. It fears that what we think is the voice of conscience is just a way of giving ourselves or others an unreasonably hard time, for reasons it may take years of therapy to discover. This is actually fair warning.

Not all inner voices are conscience. Many are what that same prayer refers to as the *devices and desires* of our own hearts. But Scriptures gives us a simple way to test whether that inner voice, that one voice measuring our choice, is or is not the cry of Wisdom. We *get guidance from I Timothy,* chapter 1 verse 5:

*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*

The point of conscience is not to make our or the lives of others lives miserable. The point is to lead is to acts of love. If choosing to do or not do something is the loving thing to do, then this is the voice of true conscience. This is the voice of Christ in us,

This is the sound of one voice

The song continues:

This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through

That’s pretty straightforward. How wonderful it is in any moment to have some one person with whom we are able to exchange words of encouragement when the road is rough, consolation in time of grief, or a word to the wise, (which most often is words from the wise to us when we are inexperienced.) The Bible is full of instances when a friend came to help a friend make it through:

* Jonathon saving David from the murderous moods of Jonathan’s own father.
* Elizabeth and Mary pondering the mysteries of their improbable pregnancies.
* Ruth and Naomi, Israelite and Moabite, Daughter-in-law and Mother-in-law,

two unfamilied widows, two economic refugees, keeping body and soul together bridging national and generational distance.

In our own lives, through the years it may have been a spouse, or of a long-time best friend.

Or it may have been that person who was for a brief time; a teacher in fifth grade, college, or Sunday School; a team coach or dance instructor, a mentor or encouraging supervisor at work; a neighbor who knows what’s going on in the neighborhood.

We have expressions for it: *a friend in need, the kindness of strangers, angels unawares.*

*The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through*

*This is the sound of voices two*

But there is more than the one voice of conscience, and the two voices of friends in need. The song continues:

*This is the sound of voices three
Singing together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery*

*There is a beautiful phrase in a traditional Presbyterian wedding prayer,*

*Give them such fulfillment of their mutual love that they may reach out in concern for others.*

Just so,

* The love of David for Jonathon conveys the hope for the unification of Israel,
* The love of Ruth for Naomi is expresses the yearning for the peace of all nations.
* The love of Elizabeth for Mary promises the unity of humanity with divinity, by the grace of God.

Neither the integrity of one, nor the intimacy of two, is fulfilled until they morph into the harmony of three.

Which is what we do when we come to worship. The voice of Christ speaks in the words of scripture, the songs of praise, and the prayer of the church. But it’s a mystery that goes beyond the church.  *Listen*! The cry of Wisdom is heard in the discoveries of science; in the morale of a healthy organization, be it an orchestra, an office, or a team;

and in the moments of concord between nations. It is heard in all opportunities for love and service the world presents for us. *Listen!* Wisdom speaks to us in the world around us. In particular, what at first seems to be a distraction is actually an invitation

to join in harmony with the many others who are working to make

this a better community and this a better world: to feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, establish justice for the oppressed, lift up the poor, and heal the scars that history has left on so many.

If we listen, we will hear Christ speaking even in the tsunami of overwhelmingly bad news that we hear every day:

* The continuing trauma of the events of a September morning after twenty years and a day,
* not the least of which is the suffering of the people of Afghanistan, those in their own country and those who are now refugees
* Our nation is troubled. Its elections, its institutions, its values, are at present so bitterly contested that this country is a house divided against itself.
* The covid-19 pandemic came, and then receded, and has returned with vengeance. Every two days as many deaths as there were on 9/11. And somehow, almost uniquely among the nations, our medical emergency has become a political stalemate.
* And meanwhile the opioid epidemic takes its toll.
* There has been no let-up in gun violence.
* Racial tensions and hate crimes are spiking.
* Rising rents are displacing people from neighborhoods where their families have lived for generation.
* Homelessness, food insecurity, unequal access to education;
* Another earthquake in Haiti.
* And the big one: Climate change, turning once-in-a-hundred-years catastrophes into semi-annual events and leaving, as Ida did, a swath of death and destruction from New Orleans to New York.

This is where we have to surrender to the mystery and *Listen!* The voice of Christ speaks to us through every problem in family, community, nation and world. Of course, none of us can constructively engage with all or even many of these festering miseries of our times. But each of us can do something. Something loving, about some of them, or some of other problems which may have occurred to you. Each of us in in a position to do deeds of love in the corner of the world in which God has placed us. And doing so with others: *this is the sound of voices three*.

This is not to say the voice of Jesus speaks only in the worst parts of human experience. The harmony is not always hidden: we must not fail to hear it also in beautiful music and art, in kindness and courtesy, inspiration and discovery, in glorious sunsets and in historic buildings; for wisdom is not to be found only in the tragic. The point is that in the best and in the worst, Christ is speaking. *Listen!*

*This is the sound of all of us
Singing with love and the will to trust.*

*Leave the rest behind, it’ll turn to dust.*

*This is the sound of one voice
One people, one voice
A song for every one of us
This is the sound of one voice*

Now, and none too soon, let’s get to the high-point of this service. And *Listen!*

ANTHEM *One Voice* Ruth Moody

 Paul O’Sullivan, guitar