

SR02214 First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

The Rev. Dr. John Judson

“Foundations: Listen”

February 9, 2014

Exodus 3:1-6;

I Corinthians 2:1-12

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John knew that he was skating on thin ice. He was a newly minted Presbyterian minister in his first call to a small East Texas congregation and the year was 1962. The town in which he lived was completely segregated; the churches, the schools, the neighborhoods and the restaurants. Even though John had grown up in Texas he knew that this was wrong and had decided that he would speak to it from the pulpit. He believed that his sermon that Sunday was Biblically based and well-reasoned. As he was delivering it a couple of people got up and walked out. At the end of the service no one shook his hand and said, “Good sermon preacher.” Most people simply walked by him with angry faces. As the new week arrived John encountered one of the leading members of his church on the sidewalk downtown. The man stopped him and this is what he said. “John, we know you are right. We are just not ready to listen yet. Give us some time.”

Have you ever been there? Has there ever been something that you knew that you needed to hear but you were just not ready to hear it? John you need to exercise more. John you need to lose a few pounds. John you need to...well I think that you get my point. The problem with all of this advice is that we know that we ought to do it all. Yet, we are not ready to hear someone else tell us. Perhaps the reason is that we have become comfortable where we are. We are comfortable eating a bit more than we should. We are comfortable plopping down on the couch rather than taking that walk. We are comfortable as a particular kind of church, doing church in a very comfortable way. We are comfortable in the burbs and are not quite ready to head out to help in Detroit or Pontiac. Though we know we need to change, the cost of so doing to our comfortableness is simply more than we are willing to agree to. We are not ready to listen.

Before we talk about Moses I want to offer a little background. Moses was someone who believed in justice and for sticking up for the oppressed. We see this first when he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew...one of Moses' people. We see this secondly when Moses defends several women who were being harassed by a group of unruly shepherds. This is what sets the scene at the burning bush. At first when Moses sees the burning bush he turns aside. Then he listens and hears God voice. Even though he was frightened, this encounter was not all bad. After all when he got home that evening he could say, “Hey dear, guess who I ran into today at the burning bush?” It is what happens next though that throws things off. God wants Moses to listen to God's plans to send Moses to liberate God's people. This is when Moses wants to stop listening. He has become comfortable. He has a wife, children and good stead job. He has no plans to listen to God's crazy idea, even if he knows that freeing the people is the right thing to do. The cost was simply too great.

The same is true with the Corinthians. They had been your typical lower class freed slaves, desperately trying to appease the gods and goddesses of the Roman Empire. They were never sure how they were doing, when one day Paul shows up and tells them about the one God of the universe, who loves them, wants to adopt them and will give them eternal life outside of Sheol. This all sounds pretty good so they sign up. However, it is at this point that they want to stop listening. They want to stop because Paul is telling them that if they follow this God and Jesus, they need to alter their lifestyle. They

need to love one another. They need to cooperate rather than compete. They need to share what they have. In other words they have to radically change how they live. This is when they refuse to listen. Even if they know it is the right thing to do. They are not willing to listen because the cost ~~was~~ is simply too great.

Paul's response to the Corinthians is very similar to God's response to Moses. It boils down to three things. First, you signed up for this. Paul makes it abundantly clear that when he came to Corinth he was not offering some better philosophy or wisdom. He was preaching Christ crucified. So when the Corinthians signed on they knew they were signing on to follow the one who had given his life for the world. Second, when they signed on, God changed them. Paul makes sure that they remember that their conversion was not based on his wisdom but on the very power of God, through the Spirit. It was the Spirit that moved them to follow Jesus and in so doing gave them a new identity. They are no longer the same old Corinthians. They are now God's. Finally they have a task to accomplish. The Spirit not only changed them and gave them a new identity, the Spirit gave them gifts. And these gifts are to be used for the building up of the community and Kingdom of God. Without these gifts the community and Kingdom would be diminished. It could not accomplish its task. Thus Paul reminds ~~them~~ the Corinthians of their importance and their commitment.

In some ways this is where we find ourselves. We are people who have listened. We have listened to the story of Christ and ~~him~~ his crucifixion. We have been touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have witnessed the power of God to change lives. We have become those with a new identity as people of the Kingdom of God. Here at First Church I believe we have worked diligently to listen to God. We can see this not only in our Vision Statement but in our efforts to make it come alive in all that we do. As Kevin said earlier, this is at the heart of our Vision Drive. Yet the danger for us is to come to a place where we say, "Wow, look at all of the good things we are doing. We have arrived." The moment we do that ~~then~~ we are in trouble. Let me be clear. I am not speaking of always looking for the next core set of beliefs. We are grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ, in scripture and in our tradition. Instead what I am talking about is that we are to always be listening for God's new word about how we can be a better and more loving community of faith. We have to be continually open to the guidance of the Spirit in our life together, asking, "Lord, what would you have of us now?"

I was reminded to this earlier in the week when I was attending an interfaith event about how faith communities can come together to impact Detroit. There were all sorts of good ideas offered up, but one comment struck home. A gentleman stood up and said, in essence, that what was really needed was for each of us to return to our churches, synagogues, mosques and temples and ask God, what God would have us to do, and then to listen; to listen for God's desires for us and for this city. The speaker got it right, we need to be continuously listening to God for God's direction for our community and how we can impact lives both inside and outside of our community.

My challenge for you then is ~~this~~, to ask yourselves, "How am I listening for God's call upon my life that I might live into my new identity as a follower of the crucified and risen Lord?"

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Comment [R1]: For those reading this but have not heard the rest of the service, they will wonder who is Kevin. You may want to add something here for context.

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