

February 7, 2016 “Learning to Listen Slowly” Exodus 34:29-35 Luke 9:28-36

A couple of years ago, I shared in one of my sermons that somebody once asked the question: For you, is prayer a steering wheel, or simply a spare tire for your life? (Original source unknown, but shared through “Sermon Fodder” on Internet) Is prayer your steering wheel, or just a spare tire for the times your life suffers a blow-out or a flat? Put a little differently, What is prayer for you?

Bishop Arthur Moore loved to tell the story of a man who had been away from his home church for some years, involved in all kinds of shady practices and criminal activities. But when he came back to his home church and testimony-time came, he was ready. He stood up and said, "I'm so glad to be back in my own church, and I want to tell you that while it's true that I have beaten my wife, that I have deserted my children, that I have stolen and lied and done all manner of evil and served several terms in jail-but I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that not once, in all that time, did I ever lose my religion!" (from James W. Moore, *You Can Get Bitter or Better*)

I remember the old story of the Rabbi and the Soap Maker. A rabbi and a soap maker went for a walk together. The soap maker said, “What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery of the world. Still there, even after years—thousands of years—of teaching about goodness and truth and peace. Still there after all the prayers and sermons and teachings. If religion is good and true, why should this be?”

The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until the rabbi notices a child playing in the gutter. Then the rabbi said, “Look at the child. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. Of what good is soap? With all the soap in the world, the child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is, after all!” The soap maker protested. “But, Rabbi, soap cannot do any good unless it is used!” “Exactly,” replied the rabbi. “Exactly!” (Variously on Internet)

Which brings us to the question: Are we “using,” living out our religion? Are we letting our faith in Jesus Christ cleanse us and renew us and challenge us - our words and our attitudes and our actions - as we go through life? Are we *listening* to our Lord??

When Moses went up the mountain and spent time with God, Moses came down with the life-changing and life-preserving rules that we call The Ten Commandments. By spending time with God, Moses learned what was important to God, and when he came down off that mountain, his face was shining so much that the people were frightened. Prayer made a difference in Moses and in the life of the people.

When Jesus took a few of his disciples up the mountain, things were changed for them, and for us, in a big way. They went up to pray, and it was a prayer-time that made a difference. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus and talked with him. Moses and Elijah represented the law and the prophets of the Jewish faith, which was amazing, but then a voice came from heaven, saying of Jesus, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

The Christian faith is about Jesus, about our belief that in this Jew from Nazareth, we have seen as much of God as is possible for us to see, for now. God speaks to us in a number of ways: through

nature, through the good works of other people, in all that is good and wonderful about this world. But God's singular self-communication, the epiphany of all epiphanies, is Jesus. We, therefore, are to listen to him.

That is why we gather here at church on a regular basis. We obey the voice on the mountain by listening to Jesus. Attempting, just for one hour, to shut out the cacophony of other voices, we are to listen just to him. Turning our backs on the myriad of false gods filling our life, we try to honor Jesus by letting him be Lord of our lives." (Wm Willimon, *Pulpit Res.*, vol. 29, No. 1, Year C., p. 32)

Preacher Charles Swindoll once found himself totally stressed out, trying to balance too many commitments. He became nervous and tense. He was snapping at his wife and children, choking down his food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated every time there was an unexpected interruption in his day. He wrote in his book, *Stress Fractures*, that before long, things around their home started to reflect the pattern of his hurry-up life style. He said the situation was becoming unbearable. Then it happened. After supper one evening his younger daughter, Colleen, wanted to tell him something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, "Daddy, I wanna tell you something, and I'll tell you really fast." Suddenly realizing her frustration, Swindoll answered, "Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly." He has never forgotten her answer: "Then you listen slowly." (*Stress Fractures*)

It's hard to do anything slowly today. If you drive the speed limit, the car behind you will press into your bumper, bullying you to go faster. Folks today - and I am included - run around with our little hand-held computers that we call phones, trying to balance information and time demands as we multi-task. And yet, somewhere deep inside of us, we want to listen. We yearn to hear God's Word to us and to hear our Lord's commands to us. We need to listen slowly.

This morning, driving to Winsted, I was fretting about this and that and stewing about other things. I asked God to "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me," which is from Psalm 51. The Word I heard in response was this, "Be still, and know that I am God." (Ps 46). Be still... let God speak, and listen slowly in the midst of this fast-paced world.

A elderly man told his pastor, "I always wanted a mountaintop experience.... There have been times when the presence and power of God have moved me, deeply... But I wanted more, and I didn't get it... But the other night, I was in my kitchen. Nothing looked too great about my life. I was gathering stuff together for tax-time, trying to decide whether to book a flight to go see my daughter and her family, and I was thinking about the irregularity my latest doctor's visit revealed... What do I have left, I wondered.... Is there any point to the rest of my life? As I fixed myself a cup of coffee, the experience came. No flashing lights, no clouds or even definable voice... But quietly, I heard in my heart that God will be with me every step of the way, no matter what happens in my life, and that my life matters to God. Maybe it was a hill, not a mountain, but I'm still feeling the peace and joy of it. I thank God!"

Is our relationship with God, our religion, a steering wheel, or simply a spare tire for the hard times of our lives? "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." May we listen slowly... May we

listen and offer ourselves to God in such a way that it makes a difference. If we do, our faith will shine with the Light of God's love, and our lives will make a difference!

Speak to us, Lord, and help us to listen. Give us the grace to silence all competing noises and to listen only for your voice. Reveal your way to us and help us have courage to walk the way you have called us to walk, confident that you are the Son of God, the Chosen, our Lord and Savior. (From a prayer by William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, adapted) May this be so, for each of us. AMEN.