

Hearing the Voice of the Son

John 5: 15-29

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Somehow, we now have three dogs in our house. Years ago, when we lived in the country at the end of the road, having three dogs was fairly easy. In fact, all the dogs in the neighborhood hung out at our house so a mere three that we actually had to feed and tend was nothing. But in a suburban neighborhood, three seems a bit chaotic. This is compounded by the fact that each dog is at a different stage of hearing. They each listen in a different way which is a challenge for the peace and ordering of our home. The old dog, Georgia, has lost nearly all her hearing. She spends most of her time deep in sleep. She doesn't hear when the leashes come out for a walk or when it's time to come into the kitchen. She needs a personal invitation that begins with a gentle touch and some visual guidance. The middle aged dog Ani is still in the prime of life. She hears her name and comes. She has learned that responding is the way to joy. Of course she is especially responsive to the most beautiful sound in the world: a plastic package of lunch meat opening. The puppy Murray has great hearing. But he is so flooded with sensations and excitement that he can't really hear anything. He gets distracted so easily that he forgets where he's going once he starts. He's not sure of his name and he certainly doesn't distinguish any commands. We pretty much have to catch him and scoop him up if we want him to go somewhere in particular. With all these various stages of canine listening going on, the house is rather chaotic.

The heart of our passage today involves listening. In fact, we will see that hearing is a matter of life and death. Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." Those who hear the voice of the Son of God will live. Hearing and living go together. But just what is the Son of God saying? Just how do we do this listening? And how do we act if we hear him? That's what we're after today, claiming the great truth that those who hear the voice of the Son of God will live. So let's dig into our passage.

Last week, we looked at the event recorded in the first part of John 5. Jesus had gone to the Pool of Bethesda where a multitude of invalids lay about in a vain hope of miraculous healing. There he singled out a man who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus commanded the man to rise. He called him out of being crippled into being able to walk. He called him out of helplessness back into life. As a sign of

his healing, he was to pick up the mat he had been laying on and to carry it with him. Once the mat represented being enslaved to disease. Now he was the master of the mat as he walked with it.

Controversy arose, however, when the religious leaders saw the newly healed man walking with his bed. It was the Sabbath day. The fourth of Ten Commandments prescribed that the Jews should honor that day as holy to the LORD. They were to do no work. A strict interpretation would have made carrying a mat outside of your home a violation of the no work command. When they questioned the man, however, he told them how he had been healed and that his healer told him to carry his mat. This only made the religious leaders more enraged, because they considered healing to be a work, and Jesus should not have healed a man on the LORD's Day.

To our ears, of course, this seems silly. It seems like ridiculous legalism. But to understand the significance of Jesus, we need to understand why this mattered so much to the Jews of his day. The Sabbath was a gift from God. These were people who had been slaves for four hundred years. They got no days off. Their masters alone determined when they could rest. But when God freed them, he gave them the precious gift of a day a week to rest and worship. The Sabbath was a sign of God's mercy and keeping it meant you had not forgotten who freed you and who your true master was. Keeping the Sabbath grew in importance in the days when the Roman Empire ruled over Israel. It was a distinctive discipline of God's people. The Sabbath kept their identity strong as they worshipped the LORD. So a blatant violation of Sabbath rules struck at the heart of their faith.

But Jesus only made it worse in his reply. He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." Jesus did not get into whether or not the newly healed man had taken too many steps. He did not get into whether or not healing was a proper work on the Sabbath. His reply was much more radical. In fact it was outrageous in three ways. 1) Jesus spoke of the one true God as his own Father. Not just the Father of Israel, but his personal, intimate Father. No sane person had ever done that. 2) Jesus claimed to know what his Father God was doing on the Sabbath. 3) Jesus claimed that what he was doing was just what his Father was doing in the world. Healing was part of God's ongoing renewal of life, even on the Sabbath, and that alone was his justification.

The religious leaders rightly understood that Jesus was claiming an intimacy with God that no man should dare claim. He was equating himself as being on the

same level as God himself. This sounded like blasphemy. This struck right at the heart of their most fiercely held beliefs. When you do that, people get crazy.

Monkey with someone's god and they want to kill you. They want you gone. Sometimes they just fire you: Google what happened to the fire chief in Atlanta. He published his traditional views that God is lord of all human sexuality; sexuality is not our god. That was not tolerable and he is not fire chief. Sometimes they go ahead and kill you: revenge had to be taken on the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris because the Prophet's reputation was at stake. Gunfire had to protect the greatness of God. You see how just mentioning these news items gets the blood racing?

So Jesus' claims about himself created strong reactions. Some worshipped him and devoted their lives to following him. Others seethed at him. Little has changed about that today. It's frightening to use the "J-word" in public discourse. Because mentioning the name of Jesus undermines my cherished belief that I am captain of my own destiny, that my individual self remains the final determiner of all truth. This man Jesus speaks as God and so he claims my life as falling under his authority. Some people respond with life-changing faith. Hearing of Jesus can make me weep with relief because I need a savior. Or it can make me rage with contempt, because I want to be the god of my life. It took courage to engage Jesus in his day. It still does.

Jesus knew his presence created extreme responses. He was not, however, daunted by their anger or anxious about speaking the truth. Jesus was revealing something wonderful about God. He was speaking words that could lead one from death to life. So he pressed on. Jesus taught the people of his oneness with his Father in heaven. Jesus claimed a unity with his Father in at least three ways:

1) Unity in Love and Work. Jesus speaks of his Father as a loving Son. "Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him what he himself is doing." Jesus lets us in on an open secret. At the heart of the universe there is a love story. The love between the Father and the Son has been going on for all eternity. In Jesus, that love got "earthed." The Father and the Son kept loving one another, but now the Son was loving his Father from within our skin and bone. He was loving his Father from the midst of earth and our daily life. So when we saw Jesus, we saw who God really is and what God is really like. God is at work healing and restoring a world that human sin has marred. The Father sent his Son into the world to redeem us from death into life, from brokenness into love, from sin into forgiveness. God is up to something in the

world, and we see him most clearly in Jesus who did and said just what his Father showed him.

2) Unity in Having and Giving Life. Talk about a server crash from too many hits! Just as they were reeling from Jesus speaking as one who knew God as his own Father, Jesus pressed them even further. “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (vs. 26) As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whom he will.” Could a mere man actually say something like this? We can each say, “I am alive.” That’s the wonder and mystery of being human. I realize I’m not a rock or a cloud. I am alive. But I didn’t make myself alive. And I don’t have the ability to make something alive that isn’t. That’s what it means to have life in yourself. That you *are* life, uncreated, and that you can give life, even to the dead. Jesus is saying that he, like God the Creator, is life itself. And he has been granted authority to give life to whom he will. He came to confer life upon others.

3) Unity in Exercising Judgment. The ultimate evaluation of a person’s life belongs to God. Final judgment of the world belongs to God alone. But Jesus claims here that his Father has passed that authority to him. “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son (vs. 22). An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (vs. 28-29). The man standing there in Jerusalem in front of the religious leaders claimed that he and his Father were so united in love and purpose, in being and work, that he, Jesus, would be the one by whom final judgment is rendered.

Paul echoed this when he preached in Acts, “God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed” (17: 31). God will judge the world by means of a man he has appointed, even Jesus the Son of God whom the Father raised from the dead.

This life is not the end. There will be a day when the living and the dead will stand before God. And the judge will be Jesus, the Son of God who became a man and walked among us. We are accountable to him. He is the measure of all things.

So from John 5, we have heard Jesus claim that he is the Source of Life, the Purpose of Life and the Judge of Life. We came from him, we are put here to participate in his work, and we will be accountable to him. No sane person ever

said these kind of things. No other faith has a leader who makes such claims. No one ever said these kind of things and actually got people to follow him for centuries, laying down their lives and finding joy in living for him.

This takes us around to the verse we started with. “An hour is coming. In fact, it is here. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” Literally, Jesus said, “the hearing ones will live.” The Son of God is speaking. He calls us to life. He called the lame man by the pool who had been on the discard heap for 38 years to get up and reenter life in the world. He calls us now to come out of the tombs of self into the love of the Father and the Son. He calls us out of spiritual deadness into life in Christ. Once more, we hear how the apostle Paul echoed his Lord Jesus. In Ephesians, we read “Wake up O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (5:14).

What does he mean by hearing his voice? Jesus explained, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and *believes* him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (vs. 24). Hearing, the, means the kind of belief that is a full hearted response. We rise from the old life into the new. Life changes when we acknowledge the three things we learned about Jesus and his Father today.

1) Jesus alone has life in himself. Hearing his voice, I acknowledge that life is a gift. I am not the source or the point. There is a Creator. The world and all that is in it were created by the love of God for the glory of God.

2) Jesus does his Father’s work in the world. Hearing his voice, I realize that the world has a purpose. My life has a purpose. God is in the restoration business and he calls me to join that. His work of calling people out of darkness into light goes on, and his disciples have a vital work to do.

3) Jesus is the final judge. Hearing his voice, I know that life goes on after this life. I will be held accountable for my life and how it fits into the purpose and glory of God. Jesus is the one with whom we each have to do. Thankfully, the Judge is also my Redeemer. As the old hymn says, “Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all”

When I believe what Jesus says about himself and his unity with the Father, my life gets ordered in a new way. My priorities change. My purpose deepens. I see reality more truly. My sight goes from dull to vivid. I see the sorrow and the beauty more clearly. I feel the despair and the hope more keenly. I love the world

more yet place no ultimate hope in it. I get oriented toward the magnetic north of Jesus the eternal Father's Son come to earth.

The question remains of how I will hear that voice. Am I Murray the puppy flitting about from one thing to another, unable to hear the sound of God's call because I am so easily distracted? Am I Georgia the old girl, dreaming so deeply that I am lost in my own world? Do I feel it is too late to change, too late to hear the master's voice? Or am I Ani the middle dog, able to hear, but needing to choose to be responsive, ready to come when called because I know what makes for life?

Jesus speaks. His voice has the power to call us from death to life. The hearing ones are the believing ones who become the living, breathing, doing ones. The time has come when the Son of God speaks. The hearing ones pass from death to life. He speaks. He calls you by name. He claims you and calls you to follow him as your Lord and God. Do you hear him?