

Bring Life: Listen

COMMUNION

March 7, 2021

1st Corinthians 1: 18-25

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2: 13-22

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

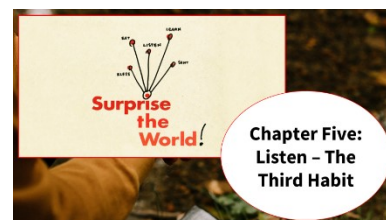


We began this journey into a practical Lent with the habit of blessing others through words of affirmation, through acts of kindness, or through gifts. In the

scriptures we saw Jesus beginning his ministry as he revealed that the kingdom of God had now come near. Jesus called those drawn near to repent and believe the good news that God loves them. Last week we heard the call to go out into the world to eat together and to share the table with others. In the scriptures we saw Jesus model what this looked like – eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus reminded us, after all, that he did not come for the righteous but for the sinners, the lost, the broken, the hurting, the searching, and the wayward. At the table, we too can meet and minister to such as these. This week we are called into the habit or practice of developing our ears and hearts as we seek to better hear and understand the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. In our passages from John 2 and 1st Corinthians 1 we will see how God talks to the faithful in his own language. As we prepare to do so this morning, let us begin with a word to invite the Holy Spirit this morning...

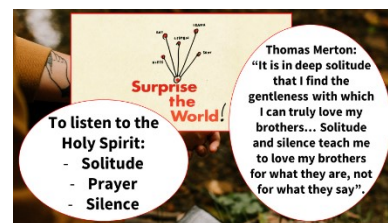
Have you ever had a flight cancelled and been waiting in the long line to try and find another way to get to your destination? In those times it is crowded in line and people are talking on their cell phones and are complaining loudly about the situation that they too find themselves in. When an announcement is made over the intercom system, you just cannot quite hear it. You can tell something is being said, but you cannot make out what is being said. Or maybe you have been at a sporting event and the crowd is going bananas as the tight game winds down. There is a call made and you can tell that the announcer is saying something, but you cannot quite hear what the call is. It could determine the outcome of the game. But you just cannot hear what the call was.

I think for a lot of Christians, their experience with the Holy Spirit is a lot like these scenarios – you know God is trying to tell you something but too many people or too many things are offering interference. To really hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, we need to tune out or turn off all the other voices and influences in our lives. Perhaps you experienced this struggle this past week as you sought to bless or eat with others. You felt the nudge, you heard the whisper, you really wanted to be a part of drawing the kingdom of God near, but the other voices were just too strong or they were just loud enough to drown out what the Spirit was trying to lead you to. Or, maybe like many of us, one or both of the twin mission killers of fear and laziness afflicted you. Author Michael Frost identifies these two emotions as the primary mission killers at the start of chapter five, which is called “Listen: The Third Habit”. Fear comes in many forms: fear of persecution, fear of standing out, fear of causing offense, fear of having to answer someone’s tricky question or accusation.



Fear's twin is laziness. This is not the laziness of just wanting to sit on the couch, munching chips, watching our favorite television show. This is the inner voice that tells us not to bother with that person and their need, that tells us that we do not have time, that tells us that we need to take care of ourselves first, that tells us we deserve that "me time" on the couch. Frost argues that these are twins because they so often work together to come up with dozens of reasons for why we cannot help others or serve others. It is the Spirit, the voice of God, that counters these voices of fear and laziness as well as the voices of the world that lead us away from being in mission, away from bringing the kingdom of God near as we seek to engage the world around us.

The ability to listen to the Holy Spirit requires some skills or practices. For many of us, myself included, these skills or practices do not come naturally or easily. Frost argues that in order to really listen to the Holy Spirit, the practices of solitude, prayer, and silence are required. What is your first reaction to these words? For many people, the idea of intentionally being alone with God is intimidating, it is frightening. Add into this practice the habits of praying and then being silent before God – well, maybe that feels like a bit too much. Small steps, my friends, small steps. Theologian Thomas Merton shared these words of wisdom: *"It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers... Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say"*. It is only when we get alone with God, turn to him in prayer, and wait for the Spirit to speak that we open ourselves up to the power of God to work in our lives.





Turn with me to 1st Corinthians 1. In this passage Paul speaks of the necessity of listening to God's voice and of the consequences of ignoring the Holy Spirit. In the

cross we find the power of salvation. At the cross, Jesus

died to free us from our bondage to sin and from the pleasures of the flesh. In verse fifteen Paul writes, *"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"*. To the



world, to those without faith, the idea that someone would die for our souls, that someone would willingly be the sacrifice to pay for our wrongdoings – these things make no sense. Why would anyone do these things for someone else? What is the benefit to this person Jesus? What did Jesus gain by dying?

From the world's perspective, success and meaning in life are determined by what you have and by who you are according to the world's standards. This is the wisdom of the world that Paul is referring to. Faith is not about wisdom or even understanding. Faith is about belief. As Christians, we proclaim Christ crucified and, for those who believe that Jesus died to save us from our sins and from the power of death, the cross has the power to save. To those who do not believe, the message of the cross is a *"stumbling block"* and it is *"foolishness"*, to use Paul's words. What is it that leads us to the place of belief? Did someone argue you into believing in Jesus as the Lord of your life? Or did God's presence become a part of your being, a part of who you are at your core? The witness of other Christians, the experiences we have when God becomes tangibly present – these are critical parts of our faith formation. So too is the Holy Spirit.

The presence of God within – the voice, the nudge, the whispers that help lead us to belief – the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and minds is also a critical part of our faith formation. Once we invite Jesus into our lives, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, becoming God’s indwelling presence within us. It is this presence within that brings us God’s wisdom and guides us to live our faith in a way that is holy and pleasing to God. It is the Spirit’s presence that has led us to bless and to eat or share the table with others this past week. The Spirit is the power of God alive in each of us.



To study an example of one who was led by the Spirit and to begin to see how the Spirit helps believers to see and engage the world from God’s perspective, turn with

me to our second passage, to John 2. In this well-known passage, Jesus enters the temple just before Passover and begins to cause quite the scene. The temple would have been preparing for the celebration of the Passover. To help frame the scene, think of Sturgis in the two weeks before the Rally begins. Vendors and merchants begin pouring into Sturgis to get all set up for the crowd of bikers that will descend upon Sturgis. Gas prices, hotel room rates, and other prices are sometimes adjusted to take full advantage of the incoming tourists and visitors. In the days leading up to the Passover, the money changers would have come in to set up booths. One must have temple coins to buy things in the temple. The exchange rate would have been very favorable that next week. The sellers of doves and sheep and cattle would have begun to move in and set up temporary stables and coops. In the high demand of the Passover week, each animal would bring a nice profit. Other vendors would set up tables, anticipating a big week of selling their religious goods. This would be the scene Jesus walks into.

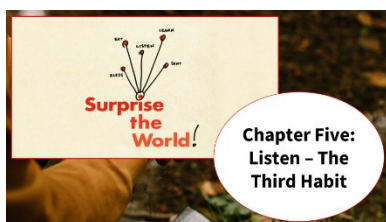
Jesus is at once energized. Making a whip from the cords he found in the temple, Jesus began driving out the sellers and money changers. The birds and sheep and cattle were scattered, the coins were sent flying here and there. Chaos suddenly reigned. He shouted, *"Stop making my father's house a marketplace!"* The temple was a house of worship, not a farmer's market. Seeing Jesus in action, the disciples recalled a verse from Psalm 69, verse 9: *"Zeal for your house will consume me"*. All of this was very upsetting to the religious leaders and those who had turned the temple into a marketplace. Jesus was challenging their authority and pointing the people back to true faith – that faith that prefers mercy over sacrifice. By driving out the sellers and money changers, Jesus was also exposing the unjust ways of the religious leaders. They too were part of the enterprise taking advantage of those who would come to worship and offer sacrifices during the Passover.



The Jews want to know by what authority is Jesus doing these things. What gives him the right to come in and start turning over tables and creating chaos? Who is he to condemn what they have going for the Passover celebrations? Jesus answers, sort of. His answer is cryptic, veiled. Jesus responds by saying, in verse 19, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"*. The religious leaders take the statement at face value. It has taken 46 years to build the temple, how could Jesus rebuild it in three days? Foolishness! They did not understand that Jesus was talking about his body, not the actual temple. Perhaps – hopefully – a few of these religious leaders would recall his words when news came of the empty tomb.



While this is true, there is an even deeper meaning to what Jesus is saying. In these words, Jesus is reiterating a message that he preached over and over: The Spirit of God does not dwell in the temple or the synagogues or in the religious system or in the organizational hierarchy of the Jewish religion. The Spirit of God dwells in the hearts of the faithful. One did not have to come to the temple and practice this ritual or to offer that sacrifice. Being the church was not about being in the physical structure. Again, the presence of God within – the voice, the nudge, the whispers that help lead us to belief and on to action – the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts and minds of believers was what led to true faith. In this message, Jesus is saying that God was available to all and would work through all who were willing to open their eyes and to be obedient to God’s leading. Connecting to the Spirit of God within us is what will lead us to live that life that is holy and pleasing to God, to be a part of bringing the kingdom of God near.



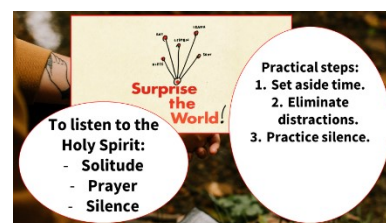
Returning to Surprise the World, our Lenten book this year, we close this time together this morning by sharing some practical ways to listen to the Spirit , to

develop and deepen our connection to the Holy Spirit. The practices of solitude, prayer, and silence are habits that we can cultivate. In chapter five author Michael Frost offers some practical steps. The first requirement is to set aside time. Most of us live such busy, crowded lives that we must be intentional about identifying and protecting a specific time each week to cultivate these habits. Frost recommends at least twenty minutes. The second requirement is to eliminate distractions. Finding a quiet time and a quiet location is



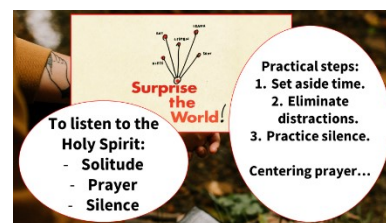
the first step. Finding a comfortable space and settling in are the next steps. For me, personally, the practices of solitude and prayer began many years ago. When my children were just little, I would get up a half hour before anyone else and find my place at the kitchen table to read and pray. Some days, when I had morning practice at 6:30, this meant getting up really early. Over the years, my time with God has grown and is usually about 90 minutes each morning.

The third practice is the practice of silence. This, for me and for many, is the greatest challenge. This remains my greatest challenge. To enter into silence, we begin



with our designated time and place, free of distractions, and then we sit quietly, just being in God's presence. My greatest challenge is simply to still my mind, to rest in God's presence. After at least two or three seconds of silence, I want to speak, to begin praying, to think about something else. Frost suggests using a centering prayer to bring to our minds a focus that can lead us into silence.

Simple breath prayers like "Come, Lord Jesus, come" or "Lord God, still my voice" can be said over and over, the first part while we deliberately breathe in, the second while we slowly exhale. After a period of centering



prayer, one is more prepared to be silent. Once we are ready to be still before God, we create space for the Holy Spirit to speak into our hearts and minds.

When the Spirit is given the stage, the voice of God will begin to lead and guide our lives. Last week I invited you to share the table with others through the street meal in downtown Rapid City. What a wonderful response the church had to that invitation and to engaging others around the table! This week I would like to invite you to come to a time of silent prayer and medication.

On Sunday evenings at 7:30 pm you are invited to join me in the sanctuary for a time of solitude, prayer, and silence. If this scheduled and dedicated time helps you to find space and a setting that is conducive to bringing life to your faith, to listening to the Holy Spirit, to connecting to the Lord, please join me tonight or any Sunday evening during the remainder of Lent.



Last week, using the passage from 1st Corinthians 1, we heard the call to "*deny self*". This call to place self after God and after others sounds like foolishness to world, doesn't it? Aren't we supposed to earn more, buy more, enjoy life more? In a similar way, the call to "*take up our cross*" as we seek to follow Jesus is heard in much the same way by the world, right? Why would one make the choice to sacrifice for others, to give of themselves for the betterment of another, to consciously decide to have less so others could have some? The truth is that we are not immune to the voice of the world. Even for Christians, the voice of the world can be stumbling blocks to us as we seek to live a highly questionable life. It is only when we allow our faith and the voice of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us that we begin to die to self and to carry our cross.

As is the case with the ongoing process of dying to self, our efforts to listen to the Spirit is a daily, moment by moment battle as well. The flesh inside each of us doesn't always want to deny self and we do not always want to follow the foolishness that Spirit is laying down. Our pride, our arrogance, our prejudices, our selfishness can be our stumbling blocks. During this season of Lent, may we each make time and space to listen to the Holy Spirit's voice, denying self and drawing closer to God as we seek to bring the kingdom near. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. The practices of solitude, prayer, and silence call us deeper into our faith. How are you going to take practical steps to begin these habits?
- 2) *Pray*. As you begin to listen to the Holy Spirit, how can prayer enhance your conversations with God? Why is prayer essential to your faith?
- 3) *Study*. Read John 3: 1-21. How do you see yourself in Nicodemus? How does the Spirit help believers to “walk in the light” (verse 21)?