
Baccalaureate Address
Fourth Presbyterian Church – N Michigan Avenue
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David L. Parkyn, President

Very early in life we learn to recognize voice. Here's the evidence: even before she masters how to hold her infant, a mother can calm her young child with the mere whisper of her voice. Why? Because voice communicates. Voice connects us to each other—mother to child, teacher to student, lover to loved one. Voice makes meaning. Voice identifies. Voice establishes relationship. Voice connects.

A measure of how well we know others is found in how well we recognize their voice. In the days before caller ID a test of friendship took place each time a caller waited to see if the friend who answered the phone would recognize his or her voice without introduction. "Hello." "Hi, it's me." An elementary school teacher knows which child is talking even with his back turned to the class because he recognizes the voice. A choir conductor knows which singer is off-pitch because she recognizes the voice. To recognize someone's voice, to identify one voice in a crowd of voices, is to know that person. Voice identifies.

Voice, of course, is worthless unless someone listens. We don't speak for ourselves, we speak for others. For a voice to be true it must be heard.

This, precisely, is at the heart of the scripture passages read tonight. Samuel is alone in his bed. He hears his name called, thinks he recognizes it as Eli's voice, and runs to answer. Eli tells the boy that he has not called his name, and sends him back to bed. The third time Samuel comes to Eli, the prophet understands that God is calling Samuel, and instructs the young boy to answer by saying, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening."

The same mandate is conveyed in the gospel account. A small band of disciples are privy to a grand and spectacular revelation of the Christ. And as a brilliant cloud overshadows them a voice speaks from this cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well-pleased; listen to him!"

Samuel as a young lad, and Peter, James, and John as adults each hear the voice of God, and though none of them immediately recognizes the voice they are told to listen.

Life transitions, like the one we celebrate tonight, are moments ripe for listening. On this night before you receive a North Park diploma and then enter the next part of your life's journey you would be wise to listen, to listen to the voice of God. And as you leave North Park we who remain must also listen to the voice of God. Each of us must heed

Eli's word to Samuel; we must embrace God's mandate to Peter, James and John. We must listen.

Yet listening, especially listening to God, is not easy. And the most difficult part of hearing God is that we must first know God's voice. Otherwise when we hear, like Samuel we will not recognize that God is speaking.

We would all have an easier time in life if God decided to use billboards to talk to us. I could drive down the Kennedy Expressway and somehow divine which of the zillion billboards is written for me, and you could do the same. There we'd be with a message direct from God. In reading the billboard we would hear the voice of God. We might not always like what God said but at least we would recognize God's voice.

But listening to the voice of God is nothing like reading a billboard. God doesn't shout from the expressways of this city; God speaks differently, so we must listen differently.

No, God doesn't shout. Rather in my life I've found that God is much like the teacher who enters a classroom filled with kindergartners having a grand time playing together. To get their attention, the teacher quietly sits on the floor in the very middle of the room and begins to whisper each student's name. In my life I've discovered that God whispers, so if I am to hear God's voice I must be listening.

As I've listened to God's whisper in my life, here is what I've learned.

God's whisper sometimes confuses before it clarifies. This is not because God is wrong. No, it is because we are not always wise to hear clearly and to understand rightly. In an old Spanish saying, it's put this way: "God writes straight with crooked lines." God's whisper sometimes confuses before it clarifies.

When God whispers we should listen not so much for information as for story. . . for the story of our life. God's whispers paint a pathway to follow. God's whispers are mirrors in which to get a good true look at ourselves. God's whispers shed light on the still darkened horizon of our life story. God's whispers are stories which "invite and challenge and tease us into understanding and take us places we might not otherwise consent to go." When God whispers we should listen for the story of our life.

God often whispers through the voices of other people. We are companions in the journey of life; we travel together. As we walk this journey the Word, Jesus Christ, is made flesh in each of us for the benefit of others. God often whispers through the voices of other people.

Listening to God's whisper takes time. God's whisper functions in our life like a comma on the written page. It points to the need for pause in our life. Listening well, hearing God's whisper, takes practice because normally we are restless with this sort of punctuation in life. Listening to God's whisper takes time.

Listening to God can be the most succulent meal you'll ever taste. The psalmist knew this and wrote, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey in my mouth." A great meal is enjoyed most fully when we have been part of the kitchen staff, when we have "lifted the lid of the soup pot and savored the smell of the vegetables mingling." Listening to God can be the most succulent meal you'll ever taste.

Is it possible to reliably recognize God's voice when we are listening for it? I believe it is. When God whispers your name in the middle of the night know that it is God who calls. And when you hear God whisper your name respond as Samuel did, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening."

In the name of God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.