

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
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word count:

Have you “found your voice”? Perhaps you remember the time when you first began to truly know who you were and what you believed, and were able to begin to articulate a little of who you were to others.

I was a shy kid who did not talk much in school until a good teacher put me in a play and one moment I was alone on a dark stage, and the next, bright lights beat down from above and I was responsible for beginning the opening words of *Twelfth Night*, “If music be the food of love, play on...” I can still remember—how harsh the lights were, how nervous and alone I felt, and...every single word that I said, memorized to this day.

I imagine that many of you can relate to this in different ways as you took your own journey of self-discovery that brought you to where you are today. At some time in our lives, in whatever ways we come to do it, we have to find our voice.

This is the theme of the film, “The King’s Speech.” Most British Monarchy gawkers remember the romantic notion of a king that gave up his throne for the wo-man he loved, as Edward VIII struggled to keep Mrs. Simpson by his side. Little was made of the shy, knock-kneed younger brother, Bertie, known to all as Prince Albert, whose stammer made his little speeches at secondary events painful for all to hear.

Suddenly, with the abdication of his brother, Bertie became Great Britain’s “second chance” at having a strong leader during what would become one of the most difficult times the British Empire would face, as Hitler attacked them at home.

The greatest obstacle preventing Bertie from becoming King George VI was his inability to find his own voice. “The King’s Speech” focuses on how the new king’s relationship with a gifted speech therapist, Lionel Logue, enabled a stumbling stammerer to become a beloved sovereign. Logue is self-taught and without credentials. But he utilized the most advanced technology he had at hand to help his royal student. With music playing loudly through headphones to mask the sound of his voice, the king was asked to record Hamlet’s famous, “To Be or Not to Be” speech. Later, Bertie heard his voice played back on a phonograph without the music in the background; a flawless recitation of Shakespeare’s words, and knew that he had “found” his voice for the first time.

But, Logue also used something more important and authoritative: the age-old power of relationship, to tune and tone the king’s voice. It took years of coaching, learning to trust each other, and building respect for each other, before Logue could declare to the man only he as a commoner could call, “Bertie,” “You must have faith in your voice!”

But when that point came, it was their relationship that enabled the man no one ever thought would be king finally to respond, “I have a voice!”

Do you have faith in your voice? Have you found your voice in the ways in which it needs to be used in the world so that it expresses the best you can bring to it?

In the past week, young pro-democracy protestors in Egypt have shown what it means to find their voices for the first time and to use them. In so doing, we watched the unfolding of an historic event in Egyptians’ own “Berlin Wall Moment.” Despite the deaths of some three hundred martyrs, they broke ground for a new beginning for Egypt without violent revolution. As one British newspaper headlined, “The magnificent sight of People Power finally overwhelming a corrupt dictator cheers every heart.”

What's next for Egypt may be a fulfillment of the promise of today or it may simply mark the beginning of the country's crisis, not its end.

Although removed in several ways from the speech attributed to Moses as he gave the message to those who would reach the promised land, the sense feels the same today: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." And, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving God by obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors..."

Having found their voice in the streets, these messengers must live out the message that they hope to bring for their future—a democratic government, peace and prosperity, opportunity for their people, and an egalitarian society that respects its political, religious and social diversity.

It will be up to the people now whether or not the message is absorbed and lived. It will no longer be about the messengers singing in the streets of Cairo.

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The apostle Paul wrote with striking metaphors about the ministry he and others had conducted in Corinth. He mentions messengers other than himself—a preacher named Apollos who was educated in Egypt, and Cephas, known to us as Peter.

In Corinth, the congregation had become somewhat divided over which of these preachers they should believe and follow in order to absorb who this Jesus was and what he meant to them. In this short passage Paul's metaphors emphasized that the sole issue was not the messenger, but the unity they could agree upon with regard to how their faith in the message itself would lead them to find their voice as a community.

Australian Professor of New Testament, William Loader, says,

"Paul is aware that the gospel he preaches is on a collision course with values which many still hold in Corinth. Outstanding people, according to these values, were those who could make an impression by being convincing speakers, demonstrating sophisticated wisdom and knowledge, and, above all, powerful and brave. These were Roman ideals and seemed good to most. To be ambitious was to want to be like that. For such people powerful impressive leaders were to be admired. Then, faith is about seeing in Jesus the impressive hero, a kind of Jewish Hercules, and seeing God as embodying all the things you most admire and (secretly) would like for yourself: to be all powerful and have everyone glorifying you, what we might recognize as a projection of infantile fantasy.

"From Paul's writings we see that he knew that he was not as impressive a speaker as others. He also seemed to value the wrong things. Making a crucified Jewish Jesus the centre of faith flew in the face of what good people in the wider community saw as ideal. It was very subversive and seen, probably, by most as ridiculous.

"Paul confronts these would-be wise Corinthians Christians with the executed Christ, who shows that God is not to be seen as the projection of male fantasy about power and control, but as the compassionate one who confronts human foolishness and invites relationship for change."¹

This church would be about a Jesus who found his voice in acts of self-denial and practiced servanthood towards others. To follow such a leader demanded the same behavior, and this behavior being considered what we would later name a Christly virtue was a new idea.

In this letter to a church, Paul talks quite a bit about the message—what it means to accept one's faith, and how that message takes root in how the people of the congregation treat each other. Paul is a little testy with the Corinthian church in this section—it is what today we would call, "a new church start," just charting its way and finding its voice. Paul is rebuking people in the church for the quarrelling and bad behavior that has at times surfaced in the congregation. He is telling

them to concentrate on growing their faith, and they will mature into a strong one that will help them find their own voices in how they will sustain one another in the matters that truly count.

There is a story told by a tour guide about a time when the group she was shepherding through a small picturesque village in Vermont passed by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, “Were any famous people born in this village?” The old man replied, “Nope, only babies.” A frothy question brought a profound answer. There are no instant heroes. Growth takes time, and even spiritual growth must be earned.

Paul isn’t the greatest pastor or preacher the church could have called, he is telling the church at Corinth. But, listen, he tells them, it isn’t about the messenger. It’s about the message. How are we living the message that we are followers of the Compassionate One who confronts human foolishness and invites relationship for change?

It isn’t about the messenger, Paul or Apollos, Paul or Peter, even Paul or Fred. It is about how we, the congregation take the message home with us and act on it in our lives in a way that makes us grow, care, live and love in ways that enrich each other as well as our community and the world beyond.

The church frequently focuses on what we can do to heal a hurting world, through educating ourselves, in our financial giving and in our direct service. It is clear that this congregation, without too much discussion, instinctively looks to be a healing balm when our own world is hurting as well. From time to time, I think we should remember to stop and name that “instinct to care,” and look to make sure it is at work around us. A church that can do that is a church that has “found its voice.” This is one of those times.

We hear of illnesses, loss of occupation, disruption and chaos in the lives of our own brothers and sisters, even death has come. In just the past month we have had several losses. At home, I see over seven feet of wood topping our entertainment center, and every inch of it is taken up with sympathy cards that many of you sent to Carl upon the loss of his mother, Gloria. I can tell you that this has been of comfort to us both. Looking at our prayer list, there is always an updated reminder of who needs to be lifted up in our community at any given time.

Today, we mourn the passing of Marilyn, a beautiful lady who always appeared interested in everything and happy to be a part of this family.

Someone asked C.S. Lewis, “Why do the righteous suffer?” And he replied, “Why not? They’re the only ones who can take it.”

But suffering along with a family when grief comes, is a congregation sending cards, notes, e-mails and kind words. I have seen it at its best, as a bucket-brigade of casserole dishes and jell-o salads, parking-lot planners plotting their course by comparing notes, knitting-needle wielding prayer-shawl creators, Congregational Care leaders and Stephen Ministers in training.

A healthy congregation is one that has found its voice—not just in standing up for an issue of justice alone, but perhaps more tellingly, in how the faith message that it is has come to embrace has caused it to reach out in love and care to those close by who need it most.

The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa, the city of his birth, but only on condition that the instrument never be played. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is unused or discarded, it begins to decay.

The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning.² When the voice no longer sings with the full meaning that naturally wants to tumble forth, the message is silenced and forgotten and a new instrument will have to take it up instead.

Today, the messengers in Cairo sing songs of joy through the streets that lead from Tahrir Square. The message they leave behind is one that will have to be learned, recited, kept close to the heart and acted upon so that a time of new hope and promise comes to be.

Moses told the people to choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving God by obeying God, and holding fast to God. Paul is asking a church in Corinth to do the same, embracing the message of their faith over any messenger that brings it, so that it may become and stay, the force that helps them grow and find their own voices in how they live their lives as followers of the Compassionate One. May we continue to recognize that the spirit of that message and voice is present here in this congregation, in these people, and may we have the wisdom and will to act with that voice and to preserve and build upon it as the precious thing it is.

AMEN.

Sermon Resources

Leonard Sweet, unquoted pieces modified from an illustration on *The King's Speech*.

1. Bill Loader, Murdoch University. *First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages*. 6A <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEpiphany6.htm>
2. *Bits & Pieces*, June 25, 1992

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of God that I am commanding you today, by loving God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving God by obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

1 And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? 4 For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.