

“The Big Listen: Knock-knock at the Door” (fn.:REV. 3 20.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Revelation 3:20

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 10/6/19

We are continuing this Sunday with our emphasis on listening—how we listen to God and how we listen to each other. As I have noted before, our faith is weighted more toward hearing than sight. So, for example, graven images and idols—an appeal to the eye—are absolutely prohibited, while listening for God’s voice—an appeal to the ear—is regularly promoted. And, we, as a congregational focus, have been doing some listening to each other—over 80 interviews with members of long-standing and members who have joined in the past several years. This focus came from the Stewardship Committee—a committee that too often gets labeled as the “fund-raising committee.” To my knowledge, in all these interviews, there has been nothing that even sounded like an “ask” for money. What was asked has been what is working well and what might work well in this congregation. What are the strengths, opportunities, and benefits that characterize us?

In light of this focus on hearing—hearing God and hearing each other—we turn to a Scripture that lifts up our capacity to hear. And, as added bonus, it is a passage that speaks of meal time with Jesus—an appropriate text for our communion observance. I will read a section of the message to the congregation in the ancient city of Laodicea. The writer of the Book of Revelation speaks like the prophets of the Old Testament: he gives a word of the Lord to be heard. In this case, the Lord is the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to this word of the Lord Jesus:

Revelation 3:20: ²⁰ *Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*

In the 1930s, Knock-knock jokes went viral in the United States (some would say it contributed to the “depression” in the Great Depression!). You know the form: Knock-knock. (Who’s there). And then, of course, a terrible pun! Ok, so just one: Knock-knock (Who’s There?) Olive (Olive who). Olive you? Do love you me? Punny, punny!

Serious segue: In our text today, we have the great “Knock-knock” of the Bible. Jesus says, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking.” And the question is this: Are we going to say more than “Who’s there?” Are we going to open the door?

Now, note, I did NOT say, “Will you open the door?” That’s a sermon I have heard many times...and even have preached—that you individually need to open the door of your heart to let Jesus come in and live in you. Perhaps there are other Scriptures to warrant that...but not this one. You see, in this case, Jesus is knocking on the door of the church—not the building—but the community of people that are the church. We too quickly individualize this text into what’s happening inside me...but Jesus’ words of knocking are not addressed to us as individuals but to us as a congregation, as a community, as a collective.

The question here is NOT how well am I making Jesus welcome in my life?—a worthy question. No, the question is how welcome are we—the plural—in receiving Jesus into our communal life. And the meal that Christ is going to come in and share is with a plural “you all.” A congregational meal!

Jesus comes to the congregation. You perhaps recall the old proverb that “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.” That is, the thought being, of course, you may have strong links in a chain, but the chain’s utility and usefulness stands or falls on the weakest link. Here in Jesus’ knocking, the focus is on how we collectively are moving to welcome Jesus. The response stands or falls on our shared-opening the door.

So, let me connect to the recent efforts in the “Big Listen”—individual and group interviews. First, one of the repeated themes in the “Big Listen” is that not everyone is happy. Lord knows we all have our complaints, disappointments, and desires for some things to be different in the life of the congregation! But there is an overwhelming tide of joy...joy that God is at work among us...joy that we together are keeping on with serving Christ in the heart of Knoxville...joy that we are a community of deep relationships...indeed the joy of the benefits of being together for worship, for study, and for service.

So, in finding the core to all the various expressions in the Big Listen, the Stewardship Committee summarized it in this way: Embracing JOY (you see their logo in today’s bulletin). You will be hearing and seeing this theme throughout the month of October. And JOY is an acronym (a word where each letter represents a word): Jesus, Others, You. This acronym for JOY has been around for more than 50 years. I hope you have heard it before. For some, it is too simplistic. For others, it is too self-denying—that somehow if you put Jesus and others first, then you become a doormat to tread upon.

I personally find the acronym a good reminder of priorities—we are serving Christ in the heart of Knoxville. Jesus is first—joy begins there. And, second, we are about the love of neighbor, love of others—the second portion of Jesus’ Great Commandment. And, third, “you, yourself,” are still a priority (the command, after all, is “to love your neighbor **as yourself**”). What we do around here as a church should do something for you—there are benefits, opportunities, and warm-fuzzies! So, all in all, JOY comes from an ordering of priorities: Jesus, others, yourself.

To connect to the knocking of Jesus at the door—our greatest joy is that which is shared together. Mutuality is key. What we do together is better than anything we do by ourselves individually. Jesus is knocking on our collective door...and the best happens when we are together in opening the door. Jesus comes in and eats with us and we with him. A meal alone may feed the body but does little for the spirit! Again, what we found in our Big Listen is that we enjoy connections, community, fellowship. The word “family” was often used—joy in the church family. However, the word “family” has some extra freight for many of us, as both our greatest joys and our greatest disappointments likely center on “family.”

So let me try an alternative word to family—tribe. Tribe is a collective word. The word “tribe” includes those who are not blood-kin; the tribe includes all ages and genders; tribes have ways of engrafting new members. To overuse a sports metaphor, how often I have heard someone’s travel story of being in a distant airport or faraway wilderness and their seeing a stranger with a “Power T” on their hat or clothing. And without thinking, the words bubble out of the traveler’s mouth: “Go Vols!” – a connection to someone in the tribe.

On this World Communion Sunday, we...not me, not you...but we open the door. We open the door with those around us; and we open the door with faithful followers of Jesus around the globe.

On World Communion Sunday, our tribe includes brothers and sisters in our midst, those who will be included in the home communion today, those around our country, and those in our world.

On World Communion Sunday, we embrace JOY: Jesus, others, yourself.

- This is Jesus' table. What joy!
- There are others at this table...not just those in this room but all around the world at this table. What joy!
- And this table is for you and for me. What joy!