

Free Speech

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Samuel 3:1-21; Isaiah 55:6-9

It was freshman orientation at college. Westminster College. A couple hundred of us new college students were ushered into a small auditorium for a reading test. We were told that there were to be a few sections of the test and that we should pay attention to the verbal instructions. That was about the last thing I heard from the proctor before I began goofing off with a couple of my newfound friends in the back row. The next thing I heard from the front was, “Begin”. So I began and started reading the text before me and after I got through the first couple of paragraphs I thought maybe I should go back and reread what I read to get the full gist and all the details. As I went back to the beginning all of a sudden I heard, “Stop.” So I stopped. “Please circle the number next to the line where you stopped.” So I circled the second line of the first paragraph. And then we were told to move on to the next section. Now one of the instructions I had not heard while I was messing around in the back row was that the section we were about to read was for reading speed. And I had just indicated that my reading speed was about ten words in two minutes. So about two weeks later I was asked to come into the Dean’s office and there I was politely encouraged to take a remedial reading course. I tried to explain to the Dean what I had done – and though she doubted my story – she agreed to let me continue through the first semester and if I was getting in trouble I would take her remedial reading course. All this because I didn’t choose to listen. I didn’t really care to listen.

Unfortunate things can happen when you don’t care to listen.

Juxtapose that story with another story. And this is another one out of my childhood – and it is a composite memory I have of sitting with my father in our family room on the east side of Detroit on summer nights and between us there stands a Panasonic radio. One of those old AM/FM radios with an antenna that sticks up. And one of us is playing ever so sensitively with the dial trying to pick up the frequency of a radio station in St. Louis – KMOX. KMOX broadcasted St. Louis Cardinal baseball and the frequency had a span of several hundred miles – and in the evening – especially a clear evening - there was always a chance you could pick up the Cardinal game all the way in Detroit. So there we would sit with our ears nearly touching – straining to hear for that minute spot on the dial where we could catch the sound of Jack Buck giving us the play by play. “There it is! There it is!” we’d say as we could faintly hear the familiar voice.

It is amazing what you will do when you really care to listen.

I suppose one of the reasons why we are all here this morning – at least most of us – is that we are interested to some degree in hearing what the voice of God might say. When the alarm clock went off this morning we decided to get out of bed, get ourselves ready and drive over to the church and sing our songs, prayer our prayers, recite our creed and listen for the word of God. This is how we tune in. We’re not, of course, the only folks interested in the voice of God – plenty of people who don’t go to church are interested to some degree in what God has to say. And they find all sorts of ways to tune in. Because the truth is, God is speaking in all sorts of ways, right? It’s one thing you pick up in the Bible – God speaks in all sorts of ways to all sorts of people in all sorts of

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places. Some hear audible voices, but most don’t. Moses had a burning bush, the wise men had a star, the disciples saw and heard a rabbi, Paul had a blinding light. God speaks in all sorts of ways.

But one of the common mistakes we can make while reading the Bible is to think that God speaks primarily in special effects. That if we are really going to hear God it is likely going to be through some supernatural, pyrotechnic way. That some bolt of lightning or some stereophonic voice or some celestial movement is going to be the way that God gets our attention.

And that’s the way we often think about God – as this divine being whose job it is to get our attention. Yo, God ... if you want to speak best you work at getting my attention! I’m a busy guy. Got things to do, bills to pay, chores to run, golf to play – so a little writing in the sky, a little bolt from heaven, a little voice over the loudspeaker and I am all ears. And sometimes that may be the very thing that happens. But not very often, and not ever to me.

Because the truth is God is speaking all the time. The heavens are declaring the glory of God, the psalmist says. The earth is full of the goodness of God, he says again. The kingdom of heaven is in your midst, Jesus says. The Spirit blows where it wills, he says. God is speaking to us all the time. Every waking moment – every non-waking

moment – God is speaking to you. In the Bible. In creation. In the circumstances of life. In your conscience. God is speaking all the time. But God is not necessarily concerned about trying to get your attention. God is happy though to wait until the end of time for you and me to give our attention. But God is not necessarily concerned about trying to get your attention.

I love our story from 1 Samuel that has the young religious neophyte Samuel in the court of Eli – and he is lying down and he hears the voice of God. It’s not that he is listening for the voice of God, but he hears it. And when he hears it he assumes it is the voice of someone else, particularly his teacher. So he goes to Eli and says, “What do you want?” And Eli says, I didn’t say anything. And Samuel goes back to bed. And the voice comes again, but again Samuel is not listening for the voice of God. So back to Eli he goes. He does this a third time until Eli figures it out and says to Samuel – go back to bed and say, “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” You’ve been speaking all the time, Lord, but speak again because now you have my attention. And the Lord speaks and Samuel give his attention and he is enfolded by the movement of God.

The Lord speaks, Samuel gives his attention, and he is enfolded by the movement of God and goes on to be one of the great and wise judges of Israel.

Do you have any interest in being enfolded by the movement of God? We all get enfolded by something, right? We get enfolded by anxiety. We get enfolded by our own egos. We get enfolded by our work. We get enfolded by our golf game. We get enfolded by our goals and deadlines. We're all getting enfolded. But what about getting enfolded by something as beautiful and as gracious and as lovely as the movement of God. What would it mean for you and me if we were to give all our moments over to being enfolded in the gracious, loving and beautiful movement of God? To let God's voice enfold us?

So I've asked our friend Jonathan Spivey to do me a favor this morning. I've asked him to play just a small section of a piece of music of his own choosing. Something important to him. So this is a section of Franz Schubert's *Impromptu in A-flat*.

(Jonathan plays)

Steve: So Jonathan, that's a beautiful piece of music. Obviously something important to you. Is it something you just picked up this morning?

Jonathan: Uh, no.

Steve: How long ago did you come across it?

Jonathan: *(Chronicles the journey from 4th grade to 9th grade)*

Steve: So what happened between when you first picked up this piece of music to now? What allowed these notes to enfold you the way they obviously do now?

Jonathan: *(describes his journey with the music)*

Steve: So it's one thing to have in your hands a beautiful piece of music – but it's another thing for it to enfold you. It actually takes paying attention to it. Picking it up, listening to it, studying it, giving it attention, rehearsing it and then finally expressing it through trained hands.

The music doesn't run after us to **GET** our attention. It waits for us to **GIVE** it our attention.

So we who would dare to desire to be enfolded by the movement of God – who would dare desire to hear God speak to us – who would dare wonder what life might be like if we were to listen and take the Spirit of God into our lives --- we might begin by realizing God is not in the business of getting our attention. The music is there, it's up to us to give it our attention. And attention must be paid. Because God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. The score of his voice may not be a score we've ever even heard before.

And so we pay attention. Speak Lord for thy servant is listening. We lie down and listen. We pause. We take out the earbuds. We grow silent. We watch events unfold and we wonder about them. We open the pages of the Bible and we read them. And we read them again. And we read them again. We bow our heads and pray. And in our prayer we speak ... maybe. But then we listen more than we speak. We listen in the silence and we recount our day and we wonder what are you telling me Lord? We take long walks and we ponder the land and the water and the sky and our fellow human beings and we know that the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord and the goodness is trying to speak. The frequency is on the radio. The proctor is giving instruction. And we lean in and we listen and we tune and we listen. And we go back to our Bibles and we read the score and we make ourselves available to it. And we pay attention and we practice and we fall in love with it. We let God exercise his right to free speech. We give God his free speech. And we pay attention. And we let it seep in and we fall so much in love with it that we express it with all our heart and with all our mind and with our soul and with all our strength. And when we give it our heart, mind, soul and strength we end up

loving the world with it. We begin to play what the composer intended to be played. We start to live like Jesus because long ago we let the composer inside of us. And we let him shape us and we let him express himself through us. And we get enfolded by the movement of God.

Because God is moving forward right? God is moving forward with grace and with love and God wants to embrace us and take us with him. And when we let the voice of God, the music of God, the grace of God enfold us – then there is nothing to fear, nothing to grow anxious about, nothing to worry about – because we are enfolded. We are embraced. We are lost in the wonder of the composer. And all of what we do reflects his glory.

Speak Lord...speak Lord...speak Lord...for your servant is listening.



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