

PNEUMA - THE CONFIRMATION OF THE SPIRIT
A SERMON BASED ON 1 JOHN 4:1-6
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
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10:00 a.m.

It can be difficult to recognize a voice.

The challenge of recognizing someone on the phone used to be real.

It doesn't happen as much any more,

because with call display and the current technology

not only do you see the number of who is calling,

but often a picture of them too.

But it can still happen.

When my now adult son was living at home and he answered the phone,

people would consistently mistake him for me.

Which was flattering for me.

and a little unnerving for him.

Unnerving both because he was being mistaken for someone

over twice his age, ergo he sounds like an old guy,

but also for the fact that sometimes

people would launch into pretty pastorally sensitive stuff
before he could correct their assumption
that they were not speaking to me.

It can be a challenge to recognize a voice.

It's important to have it confirmed.

We want confidence

that the voice we are listening to,
is the voice we should be listening to.

I don't want to listen to the voice of my surgeon

tell me what's wrong with my car.

That's the wrong voice.

I would question my mechanic's estimate

for the future of my financial portfolio.

That's the wrong voice.

I would question my financial advisor's plan

for colour choices in my house.

That's the wrong voice.

I want to be able to recognize and confirm
that the voice I'm listening to,
is the one I should be listening to.

Nowhere is it more important and more difficult,
than when it comes to those times God speaks.

With so much harm done in God's name through the centuries,
with friends and family members
making some bold and confusing and outright bad choices,
because they say, God told them...

With the potential of missing God's voice and prompting
toward a plan, a path, a purpose for us
when he does indeed speak,
well, God's is a voice
I want to be able to recognize and confirm.

It isn't necessarily easy.

Interestingly, the revised common lectionary,
a three year schedule of Scripture readings
designed for churches to use on Sundays,

leaves the beginning of today's reading off the schedule.

We are hesitant to test the spirit.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates the first two verses.

“My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear.

Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you.

Not everyone who talks about God

comes from God.

There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world.”

It is not the kind of passage

that builds consumer confidence in preachers.

Don't believe everything you hear when it comes to God-talk,

John says.

There are false prophets out there.

I've had experience at a conference,

all the worse for having brought others with me.

One speaker was particularly egregious.

He would have failed Bible interpretation class at seminary,

at the school where they train ministers.

He was a case study in how not to use the Bible.

He told us God had laid a burden on his heart,

had given him a message, a vision,

so he went looking through the Bible,

for all the verses that would support his vision.

He went hunting for the verses that made the point

he wanted made.

They were hung on the powerpoint screens,

like animal heads on a hunter's wall.

His own points,

were set right in among the verses,

made to look like Scripture themselves.

It was backward.

Ideally, Scripture hunts us, searches us, shapes us.

We do our best to avoid imposing ourselves upon it.

Like I said, he would have failed his Bible interpretation class

if he tried that move in seminary.

Then he went to one word in one verse from one translation,
and built a whole theological system on it.

It was 2 John 1:8 in the New Living Translation, a paraphrase.

Be diligent so that you receive your full reward.

He went on a rant about 'your full reward.'

Saying if you aren't diligent,
you might not get all the reward in heaven
you are supposed to.

That Jesus will dock your reward,
if you haven't got the job done,
you were supposed to get done.

Then he talked about the great house he was having built.

It was obscene.

The next day, an Indian man, with a fairly thick accent,
stood to speak.

Rather than running around the stage,
he stuck pretty tightly to the pulpit,
and stuck pretty closely to his notes too,
which I particularly appreciated.

He took the time to remind us.

'What was Jesus' only question for Peter
after he had betrayed and failed Jesus so miserably?
It wasn't "Why did you, or why didn't you?"
It wasn't, 'What were you thinking?'
It wasn't, "What am I supposed to do with you now?"
It wasn't about receiving less than the full reward.

Jesus only question for Peter was,

"Peter, do you love me?"

Can you recognize the voice?

Through a pretty strong Indian accent,

I could recognize the voice.

John says,

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God:

Every spirit, every voice that acknowledges that Jesus,

has come in the flesh,

as an actual flesh-and-blood person

Everyone who confesses faith in Jesus,
not faith in their own vision,
or their own destiny,
or their own wisdom,
not in the Jesus of their own making
but in the actual flesh and blood Jesus,
as witnessed to us
by those who knew him
who wrote it down for us...

Everyone who confesses faith in Jesus,
lives in Jesus, lives like Jesus, lives for Jesus,
and therefore looks and sounds like Jesus,
has come from God and belongs to God.

Everyone who refuses,
or somehow manages to make it about themselves,
well, it is the spirit of antichrist.
Not some demonic overlord
who will take over the world for harm

But the opposite of Christ.

This is how you test the spirits.

Author Kathleen Norris tells of the time

she was asked to explain antichrist

at her church's Bible Study group for women.

She shares,

“One year my women's circle at church

asked me to conduct the Bible study session

on the Antichrist.

I wondered at the time if this was my punishment

for having missed so many of their meetings

during the year.

However, in the packet of materials provided for the study leader

I discovered something that was a relief to me,

that so great and thorough a theologian as Augustine

had given up on the subject,

declaring it to be beyond him.

Still, the women of the church were expecting something.

I went to see the pastor, hoping that he could help me.

He quickly summarized and dismissed

the tendency that Christians have always had

to identify the Antichrist with their personal enemies,

or with those in power whom they have reason to detest.

It is an easy temptation:

in our own time,

the Antichrist has been equated with

Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin

and more than a few of the U.S. Presidents.

She writes,

What the pastor said was so simple that it will remain with me forever.

‘Each one of us acts as an antichrist,’ he said,

‘whenever we hear the gospel and do not do it.’

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God.

This is how you can confirm the Spirit of God and that you

are hearing from God.

Ask what is being said about and done with Jesus.

It is likely the Spirit moving

when Jesus is confessed, acknowledged, imitated, exemplified,
copied into real life, into the flesh, into action as well as words

You will know the message, the voice is coming from God,
when you see Jesus, and hear Jesus.

Jesus said I am the good shepherd.

The sheep know my voice, listen to my voice and follow me.

I lay down my life for the sheep.

When you get to know Jesus,

when you see his life, his teaching,

his self-sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection,

his forgiveness, his love, his patience, his healing

his strength,

You will begin to recognize his voice and his moves.

It has been said that when officers were being trained
to identify counterfeit money,
they weren't given counterfeit bills to look at,
they were given real ones.

It is in studying the real bills,
in becoming so familiar with them,
in coming to know every detail of them,
they were able to tell the fake ones immediately.

Right after a warning about the false prophets,
John gives his description of what the authentic child of God
looks like, or starting to bear resemblance to.

“Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God,
because God is love.

This is love,
not that we did a good job in loving God,
but that he loved us,
and sent his son,

as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Since God so loved us,

we also ought to love one another in that way.

It is the love of sacrifice.

No one has ever seen God;

but if we love each other,

God lives in us.

Listen to this following story, by William White,
originally a Hermann Hesse fairy tale.

Listen for Christ's voice. I think you'll recognize it.

“A young woman gave birth to her first child

just a month after her husband had died in a tragic accident.

She was from a caring and loving church.

They were all concerned about her and they threw a great shower,

providing her with all she'd need

to care for his new child whom she named Victor,

after her deceased husband.

After the shower, when all the guests had gone, Doc Burns,
an eccentric old man who lived nearby,
and who wasn't really a doctor, stopped in.
He said that he, too, had a gift for the young boy.

But his gift was unique;
he would grant the mother one wish for her son.
The woman was to tell him of her wish
before the son's baptism the next Sunday.

All that week the woman pondered
what she might ask for her son and finally decided,
on the morning of the baptism,
to ask that all might love her son.

Doc Burns granted the woman her wish.

Everyone loved Victor as he grew up.
All the children wanted to play with him;
all the adults thought he was the most perfect child.
Even when Victor responded to others with scorn and contempt,
they still loved him.

He graduated from high school and went on to a respected college,
all the while living a life of ease.

He was the life of the party.

He drove a big car and wore fancy clothes.

After college, he never worked very hard.

He continued to live a life of ease.

“I collect horses, dogs and women,” he often bragged.

There were no pleasures he didn't indulge in,
and no vice he didn't practice.

Yet, everyone raved about him, the men were jealous
and the women couldn't leave him alone.

All the while his heart grew empty and his soul sicker.
He became disgusted with everyone and tired of living.
One night Victor had had enough.

He withdrew to his home
and prepared himself to commit suicide
by drinking a powerful poison.

But before he could raise the glass to his lips,
Doc Burns stopped by again.
He was even older now and moved slower.
Although Victor demanded to be left alone,
the good old man flopped himself down into a chair
and began to talk to Victor.

Doc Burns confessed

that he was a part of the reason Victor was so miserable,
for he had granted the mother's wish,
that her son be loved by all.

“It was a foolish wish,” Doc Burns admitted.

“Suppose I offer you another wish,
make it anything you want and I will fulfill it,
but be careful for wishes have a way of coming true.

Victor didn't think that Doc could give him anything
that he didn't already have,
but the old man encouraged
the younger man to think about what made him feel most

alive and challenged, joyful and content.

After much pondering,

Victor said he wished for the old magic to be taken away

and instead of being loved by everyone,

he wished he could love everyone.

“That’s a good wish,” Doc Burns nodded in agreement,

“it will bring you to life.”

It didn’t go exactly as Victor envisioned.

Instead, without his great charm,

he found friends deserting him,

others retaliated for his past wrongs

as he confessed his sin and gave his apology.

He was even thrown into jail for a few months

after admitting his guilt to some of what he’d done.

When he was released, he was penniless, sick and alone.

Hearing of his mother’s illness,

He returned to his childhood home where he nursed her,
returning the love she'd once given him.

He took a job as a janitor in a nearby school,
where he not only cleaned the floors
but loved and watched out for the children.

Finally he met a young widow and married her,
giving her and her children the love they needed.

Poor in money, status and success,
Victor became one of the richest men in the world.
For he discovered that it is in loving and giving love
not only in being loved,
that one comes to life.

Test the spirits

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us:

he has given us of his Spirit.

We know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God,

and God in them.

This is how love is made complete among us

so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment:

in this world we are like Jesus.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life,

and have it to the full."

It is in loving, not only in being loved,

that one comes to life.

Test the spirits.

If you listen carefully, I think you will find yourself

able to recognize that voice

and see the God is love.

Amen.