

WALK THE TALK

A story is told of a young boy whose parents had gone out to the nearby market to pick up groceries. During that time the apartment went up in flames. Standing on the balcony of his fourth floor apartment with the flames dangerously close, the boy cried for help. Stationed below, the firemen tried everything in their power to persuade the young boy to jump into the safety tarp below. He would not respond even when calling him by his name or promising him safety. Suddenly out of the crowd a man yelled out the boy's name and told him to jump. Without question the boy jumped to safety, narrowly escaping death. The firemen were stunned and asked the man, "Why did he jump for you and not for us?" The father replied: "Because I am his father and he knows my voice."¹

There are many occasions in our lives when we need to hear a familiar voice. I recall being in my office at work when news of the 9 / 11 terrorist attack broke. My first instinct was to pick up the phone and call home, knowing that my son was there. We spoke about the attack and ended the call with my saying that I would be home in time to drive him to his part time job at the mall, and saying *I just wanted to hear your voice*. I needed to be brought out of the shock of that unbelievable incident in New York, back into my human reality and reassurance of being connected again in real time to my family. I recall too several years ago when a major earthquake struck in California, and I immediately called my sister who lives there to see if she was ok – again, the sound of her voice answering the phone and telling me she was indeed safe calmed my nerves and brought me comfort.

The human voice is indeed a powerful force. It's what rescuers use to call out in search of potential survivors of horrific events which left them buried under rubble, or those lost in fog on a lake, or someone lost deep in a forest. And they listen intently for the

¹ <https://coastalchurch.org/hearing-gods-voice/>

encouraging sound of a human voice to lead them to where they need to go to complete the rescue. And if their call is met with silence, they reluctantly lose hope.

The tone of our voice can communicate much more than mere words. It conveys *emotion* [anger, sadness, joy...]. It can give signals as to whether we're speaking in truth or falsehood. It can burst out in joyous song. It can bring reassurance to someone who is hurting. We're blessed with the gifts of our voices, but as with all the gifts our Creator gives us, they also come with responsibility. Recent terrorist attacks and school shootings in the U.S. have led to the increased call for individual citizens to be vigilant and to pay attention to someone if things don't feel or look right – *if you see something, say something* to the authorities. And in the same week as the recent Florida incident, two more separate potential attacks were thwarted because people did just that – in one case, a mother, and in another case, a grandmother alerted authorities to their son and grandson showing signs of plotting attacks. Because they *saw something*, they *said something*, and it took great moral courage to do so when it was their own offspring they reported.

Another responsibility accompanying the gift of our voices is the call to speak *authentically and truthfully*, in such a way that *our words more and more closely connect with our actions*. It's what Jesus encouraged of his followers in our reading from Matthew (23), warning them not to follow the teachings of the Pharisees, because 'they do not practice what they preach' and that everything they do is 'done for people to see.' In other scripture, he called them *hypocrites* for reciting literal scripture with no compassion for humanity.

Now, telling absolute truth is not always easy. For example, if a criminal gangster is pointing a gun at me and asking *Do you like my suit?*, I will forego any sartorial opinion I might have and say an unequivocal *YES*, hoping that he doesn't hook me up to a lie-

detector machine. We have all probably told *white lies* in our human living, and may well do so again. Some issues don't necessarily require absolute disclosure, and it's up to each of us to decide on those. In the realm of human interaction, whether in business, families or friendships, the advice of caution is to *pick our battles*.

Another challenge of using our voice in today's world is the advent of modern technology. We need to see our *voice* as something more than simply *vocal sound*. Posting comments to websites and chat rooms are still our *voice*. Unfortunately, internet sites are allowing people to post comments that they wouldn't want to have to prove to anyone. Countless young people are being harassed and bullied online by anonymous sources with no chance to address their accusers, leading to horrible disruption in their lives, and in extreme cases, even suicide. A disturbing article in the media this week cited a study on the use of the Twitter on the internet found that 'false information on Twitter travels six times faster than the truth and reaches far more people.' The researchers found that 'the average false story takes about 10 hours to reach 1500 Twitter users, versus about 60 hours for the truth.' A co-author of the study concluded, perhaps sadly, that 'no matter how you slice it, falsity wins out.'²

While the issue of *truth* may seem to be simple, it is, always has been, and will always be, quite complex. It continually challenges us to enshrine laws that address multiple components of social issues. And our media have a responsibility too, in providing balanced accounts of issues affecting us. Locally for example, community uproar arose over the issue of an established cultural organization on its policy of not allowing women to be voting members. Editorial comment both in print and on air have focused on this one organization, yet none of them has seriously examined the issue of those local religious communities who forbid women from advancing to the highest ranks in their

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/false-stories-travel-faster-than-the-truth-on-twitter-study/>

orders. Community hype and jumping aboard the issue of the day is one thing. Truly committing to expose inequities is quite another. We'll wait and see how committed the voice of our local media will actually be revealed.

So to conclude, as we move ahead on our Lenten journey of enlightenment, how will we use our voices? Are there words you want to share with someone, perhaps words you'll regret not having said when they die? Are there words that, if spoken, could lead to more clarity and trust in a relationship? And for us as a community of faith here at Westminster, how will we use our voices in the new journey ahead? The Creator has given us opportunities that we could never have imagined before. It's no longer about the Westminster building – it's now all about our building on the strengths that have seen us come this far, and collectively seeking God's will for our next steps on the Westminster journey. We are called to speak truth in our voices about what we're willing to commit to. We are called to express our doubts and fears, with the full expectation that they will be heard. And we are called to express our hopes and dreams for what we can yet achieve as people of faith. As the young boy in our opening story, let's listen to the familiar voice of truth and love as revealed in our Creator. And if we look at it in the context of *what would Jesus do?*, let's use our voices in a way that would make him smile. And this may well make our journey forward a lot easier.

Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. March 11, 2018.