

On Finding One's Voice

1 Kings 21:1-7

Acts of the Apostles 16:11-15

Richard C. Allen

September 25, 2011

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

A theme that will weave its way through adult discipleship education this fall is the theme of finding one's own voice. When I meet with parents to talk about their child's baptism, at some point in the conversation the child usually lets us know she is trying to find her voice! She wants to be heard! We usually can't interpret that voice on that day, but we are all in the greatest of hope that the day will come when she does find language to name what's on her heart. I sometimes think of Confirmation that way, as a year for finding vocabulary that names the ways we've experienced the sacred.

I think of Beethoven composing Fur Elise as an example of one person finding his voice, finding a way to express the truth that abides in his soul. I think of Fur Elise as a love song because when I hear it, the tears well up in my eyes and I know the great composer has found his voice.

In her book, *Sweethearts of Rhythm*, Marilyn Nelson writes about an integrated, all-girls jazz band. In one of the poems, she writes elegantly of how the trumpet finds its true voice. Having resigned itself to playing only the marches of John Phillips Susa, the trumpet one day discovers it has a voice for jazz! Dr. Nelson writes in the voice of the trumpet:

“But the first time we stepped out front and center
and blasted the rafters with a long-held E,
I knew that all those years of playing marches
had kept me from being all I was meant to be.”

One of the roles a local church plays is enabling everyone in the community to find and to express their own authentic voice. In so doing, a church contributes to the fullness of each one's humanity, the fullness of each one's divinity.

In 1 Kings 21, we meet the vineyard owner Naboth. He farms a piece of land that's been in his family for many generations. It's a family farm like so many of the farms along Tryon Street and Addison Road and Matson Hill. Unfortunately for Naboth, his farm happens to be adjacent to King Ahab's land and Ahab covets what Naboth's ancestors have plowed and cultivated for hundreds of years. I picture Naboth as a quiet citizen who minds his own business, pays his taxes, doesn't complain much. But threatened to take his land away, or even to trade it for some other acreage, Naboth finds his voice.

It is injustice that causes him to stake out his ground, to discover vocabulary for resisting the king's greed; it is injustice that gives rise to his voice! Quoting from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." He speaks his truth and it costs him his life. But if he doesn't speak his truth, it will also cost him his life in a spiritual sense. If he shrinks back now, his soul will shrivel and die.

So often today, it is injustice that enables a man or a woman or a youth or a child to find a voice. One who has suffered bullying long enough finds his voice. One who has been told to sit in the back of the bus one time too many finds her voice. Two who are denied a marriage license because of their sexual orientation find their voices. One who isn't chosen for the team because he wears a yarmulke finds his voice. And so on. A church is a community where we help each other to name the injustices that persist and to find our voices!

In the Acts of the Apostles chapter 16, we find a very different situation. We are introduced to Lydia. Lydia is a woman of faith. Week to week, she gathers other women down by the river side for a prayer meeting. They pray for whatever happens to be on their hearts. They have come to count on God hearing their prayers. They have a spirit of openness. According to the story, on one Sabbath Day, the Apostle Paul joins their prayer circle and shares with them the good news of Jesus Christ, how he came to set women free to be themselves, how he came to give worth and dignity to children, how he came to liberate men from the weight of going it alone.

Lydia and the other women drank in this good news. They listened; they pondered; they wondered how to respond to this stranger. Then, Lydia found her voice and used it to extend hospitality to Paul and his friends. She says, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” “Come to my house and stay.” These words of hospitality echo through the ages.

It’s not hard to imagine the conversation shared on Lydia’s front porch. She tells Paul her life story. Paul tells her about his conversion and his mission trips and how he has found purpose in his life. In the context of hospitality, they see the sacred in each other. Lydia reveals what it has meant to her to have found her voice, how she’ll use her voice to invite the neighbors in for tea, how she’ll use her voice to invite a few new comers to join the choir, how she’ll use her voice to invite the neighborhood teenagers to form their own Wednesday School, how she’ll use her voice to invite her community into the warmth of Christian hospitality where all people are valued, where all people are understood to be made in the image of God. Hers will be the voice of hospitality.

The spirit of Lydia lives on into the 21st century. We hear her voice at South Church when Barbara and Hannah invite the congregation to a potluck supper every fourth Monday, when knitters invite other knitters to join them in knitting prayer shawls, when a sophomore invites a sophomore to attend Confirmation class, when a church school teacher invites a child into the classroom to hear the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

That voice of Lydia, that voice of invitation has a life of its own. I am so glad Lydia found her voice! It makes all the difference whenever anyone turns to a stranger or to a neighbor and says, "If you have judged me faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay."

To find one's own voice is a beautiful thing. To help someone else find his or her own voice is an incredibly beautiful thing. When I read Marilyn Nelson's book, *The Sweethearts of Rhythm*, I was moved in a way I could not have anticipated. The story itself is compelling. But what it did for me, on a personal level, took me back to fifth grade, the year we were allowed to try out a musical instrument. I decided on the tenor saxophone. I think it was to please my father who thought that instrument was cool. Mr. Dellert, our band instructor, patiently encouraged me to blow into the mouth piece over and over again, making friends with the number two reed, over and over until a sound came out sounding something like music. Playing a simple scale, then moving on to *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, and then to one of those John Phillips Susa marches. It was, for me, the finding of a voice, the finding of a way to release what had been building up inside my body.

The saxophone gave way to the piano and the piano gave way to the pulpit. It's been a series of voice-findings. So, this week I wrote a note to Mr. Dellert to let him know he was the first of many who coached me into finding my voice.

Tomorrow evening, the whole church is invited to the women's potluck supper at 6:00 and then to stay for an hour with Marilyn Nelson, one of Connecticut's poet laureates, a woman whose passion is coaxing the voices out from those in our history whose voices have heretofore not been heard. An hour with Marilyn is likely to set you free to discover your own truth, your own story; indeed, your own voice.

Naboth has a voice. Lydia has a voice. All God's children have a voice waiting to be heard. The old Gospel hymn sings,

“All God's children got a place in the choir;
some sing low, some sing higher,
some sing out loud on the telephone wire,
some just clap their hands.

This is how the texts were speaking to me this week. As always I share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.