

Flock Talk II

Acts 13:1-3

Introduction: How Do We Hear God's Voice Together?

Today is a critical day in the life of our congregation. I am so glad that you are here – especially since I told you that there would be a test today. Well, not a test exactly; it's really a survey that we will do right at the conclusion of this message.

Last week we were challenged with the message of Psalm 95 to heed the voice of the Lord: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..." (Psalm 95:7a). The warning is clearly directed to a group of people. But how do we, as a congregation, hear God's voice? It's a fair and excellent question. Jesus said that his sheep know his voice. As a Christian matures, God's voice becomes more and more familiar. You recognize the quality of God's voice and the resulting peace that comes when you heed and obey it. God's voice may be firm, but it is never condemning. Just recently, I've been wrestling with God over some issues. My prayer life has been very active as I tried to set my agenda, even though I knew God wasn't in it. My journal would show pages of conflicted thoughts and prayers. That is, until I received a clear word from God. I know the word was from God because it wasn't my plan but it brought real peace. And it was also humorous. I tried to add to God's word to me and he said – as clear as I'm talking to you – "I didn't say that." I was trying to force my agenda on God and had to back off. You see, God always wants us to live by faith.

It's one thing to hear God's voice for your own life, but how do we hear God's voice together for First Baptist Church? That's a question that the men in last year's leadership study, including all of the deacons, have been pondering. We can find help in the Scriptures this morning as we ask the same question.

Acts 13:1-3

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and

Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

How God Spoke to the Church

We’ve been over this passage before. On the Sunday that Diane and I came here, as the Southern Baptists say, “in view of a call” on Father’s Day, 2012, I taught on this passage in for the evening gathering. Back then, my message was somewhat hypothetical, since I was not yet your pastor. Today, we are faced with the real necessity of discerning God’s will together. I like this short passage in Acts 13 because it teaches us valuable lessons about hearing God’s voice together.

First, notice that God does speak to his people. I know that seems obvious, but so often churches make decisions the same way that businesses do. They weigh the pros and cons. They count the cost and, if necessary, manipulate the opinions of the people to align with the leader’s agenda. (Pause) Unfortunately, that is too often the ugly plain truth. I don’t want that. Jesus said, “My sheep know my voice.” God speaks today. We can hear him. It is ours to cultivate ears to hear his voice.

Second, God speaks first to the Spirit-appointed leaders of the church. In Acts 13, they were the prophets and teachers who were at the church in Antioch. They weren’t elected to their posts. The Holy Spirit made them stewards of the gifts of prophecy and teaching. They were simply exercising the gifts and authority that God gave to them. Their role in the church was a result of who they were and the quality of their character. The congregation simply recognized them.

It should be the same for us today. The spiritual leaders of this church, along with the pastors, are the deacons. The selection of deacons is done very carefully and it is based on the quality of their character – not their business acumen or their financial net worth. Each deacon knows the growing expectation of spiritual leadership that they carry. They are a “work in progress” as they learn to discern God’s will together and lead this congregation into increasing effectiveness for the Kingdom of God. For the last two years we have been studying and carefully reflecting together on how we might truly lead this church as spiritual leaders. Each of them has made a

commitment to continue in that quest to grow as a spiritual leader and to keep their relationship with Christ healthy and vital. Each deacon knows that their spiritual health has a direct impact on the health of this church. That is a heavy burden to carry. Appreciate them and pray for them.

So how does God speak to our leaders? Well, that's what we're learning. It begins with hearts that are open and honest with each other. It means that our deacon meetings are not convened to do church business, but rather as an encounter in God's presence to hear his voice together. We pray together – not just bookend prayers at the beginning and end – but we pray for a season. And yes, we sing together, because we are not just a business entity, but a praying and worshipping group. Which leads me to the third point...

People in groups hear God's voice when they are engaged in spiritual practices together – worship, prayer, and fasting in the Acts passage. Friends, that kind of prayer and worship requires that we be completely honest with each other – our lives opened to each other. Being open and vulnerable with each other is one of the most difficult challenges for people in our region of the country. It's why we don't pray very well together. And we need to work on that. But that kind of openness and vulnerability is absolutely required of leaders in this church. They're working on it, and I'm confident that it will also spill over into the rest of the congregation.

So hearing God's voice for a congregation happens within the fellowship of the spiritual leaders. Cultivating that kind of leadership community has been, and will continue to be, my highest priority next to the preaching ministry in this church.

The Role of the Congregation

But what about the congregation? One of the great distinctions of Baptists is our emphasis on the New Testament doctrine of “the priesthood of every believer.” The Apostle Peter used the phrase when he wrote, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...” (I Peter 2:9). The priesthood of every believer means that we all have equal access to God through Jesus Christ. There is to be no hierarchy in the Body of Christ, just

different roles that we have according to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to us. Each believer's voice is important.

Two episodes in the Book of Acts illustrate the importance of the congregation's voice. Both situations were critical, and, if not addressed satisfactorily, could have resulted in a devastating church division. The first, in Acts 6 was the problem of prejudice and the injustice that Greek widows were experiencing in the distribution of assistance. The apostles – the leaders of the Jerusalem church – proposed a plan that “pleased the whole gathering.” The second episode, in Acts 15 was regarding a serious doctrinal dispute. As in Acts 6, the solution met with the approval of congregation. Luke records, “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, *with the whole church...*” (Acts 15:22).

For major issues that face us, we take a congregational vote for approval. We need to be clear about this. *The church not a democracy.* It is not our purpose to fulfill the will of the people. The church is a Kingdom where Jesus is Lord. We are seeking to hear his voice together - to discern his will. We are not voting to see which idea receives the most support. Could you imagine what would happen if we took action on a question that received only 51% of a congregational vote? In our structure, proposals are vetted through the spiritual leadership of the church and brought to the congregation for affirmation. What we are looking for is what the church in Acts experienced. We want a plan that “pleased the whole gathering.” We want to be able to say as they did at the Jerusalem Council, “Then it seemed good to [the pastors and the deacons] with the whole church.”

Our Journey Together

All of this leads us to this day. We need to hear your voice – your honest opinion – so that we may discern God's voice and will for our congregation to move forward into the future. The survey that you are receiving will give us a good picture of the state of ministry here at First Baptist Church. This survey is for everyone. It doesn't matter if you are a member or just a regular attender. If you are a guest with us, we want to hear from you as well. We are taking time in the worship service to do the survey because it is a critical exercise in discerning God's will for our church. I hope you will realize that this isn't just a form to fill out for the church

institution. This survey is a way that we can talk honestly with each other. It is, a spiritual exercise.

Song of Response: By Faith