

Sounding the Trumpet Clearly
1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs
Salem United Church of Christ
September 22, 2019

And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 1 Cor. 14:8

There is a story I have told you before but I want to repeat today because it is revealing about current conditions in church and society.

A young man went to his pastor to confess to being an atheist and to quit his membership in the church. He no longer believed in God, he said. The pastor asked him to describe the God in whom he no longer believed, and, after he had gone on for a bit, the pastor said, “Well, I don’t believe in that God either.”¹

Something of the same thing happens today. I run into people, and perhaps you do as well, who say they do not believe in God and are done with the church. Faith to them is an irrelevance or an irritation. One says the church is too narrow in its thinking; it is closed-minded, too resolute in old and out-dated doctrines. Another says the church is out of touch with the times; its eyes are closed to what is happening around it. The world is crashing in, these people think, and all the church does is to sing its hymns and say its prayers and go on with its stuffy sameness that touches nothing in life. Another says the church stupidly clings to some kind of pre-scientific understanding of the world, and that just will not do. Science may be neither plain nor simple, but it is true, these people say, and it cannot be avoided. Perhaps you have run into attitudes like that. I know I have.

Meanwhile, the faith as we know it is none of those things. Science? We are all for it and have no argument against it. Closed-minded? Narrow? Judgmental? Far from it. We are open and affirming. Out of touch? We may not be on the cutting edge but if there is one thing we do it is to try to relate the faith of old to life today in ways that are relevant and meaningful and uplifting. The church and the faith so many people are rejecting – even our own sons and daughters and grandchildren – are neither the church we are nor the faith we hold. Still, that is how we are perceived and judged.

The situation today is that the language of the church – our beliefs, our principles, our values, our teaching – is not getting through. Other voices, often loud and unkind and unhelpful, are getting through instead, and they are turning people away from the faith once delivered to the saints.

The Apostle Paul encountered a similar problem in ancient Corinth. There was a church in Corinth, and Paul found that some of the language coming from that church was not a bit helpful. The people using that language had every good intention. They spoke loudly. They

¹ Based on Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Dear Mr. Brown* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 38.

spoke insistently. But they were divisive. Their words were a wedge driving people apart. Their language was unhelpful and disruptive.

Paul proposed an antidote to that unhelpful speech. He wanted the people in the church who thought differently than the divisive ones to put a trumpet to their lips and sound forth the truth as they understood it. “If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” In other words, if people do not hear a different version of the truth loudly and clearly and helpfully, how will they ever know that the church stands for truths that build people up and make life meaningful?

Now I do not propose to remark further on that New Testament situation. Rather, I want to bring Paul’s principal idea straight into our situation today. “[I]f the bugle gives an indistinct sound,” he said, “who will get ready for battle?” I will phrase the question in this way. What trumpets should we be putting to our lips to more clearly and distinctly proclaim the gospel we find true and helpful and undergirding? There may be several. I will confine myself to naming just three.

We need to put to our lips the trumpet of welcome.

A few years ago our Church Council and several of the committees in the congregation worked through a version of a process known as Appreciative Inquiry. The questions and conversations of Appreciative Inquiry are designed to identify not simply the prevailing mood of an organization but its core values. What we discovered along the way – nobody got together to foreordain the outcome – what we discovered along the way was that our church wants to be a church of welcome, open to everyone. We do not stand with those – religious voices though they may be – who turn people away for one thing or another, who close the church’s door, and try to close off the heart of God. We want to be a church of welcome.

Are we putting that trumpet to our lips and sounding out our welcome clearly and unmistakably or have we simply penciled the note of welcome on a sheet of paper thinking the playing of the song is the writing of the music? How are we getting the word out that this is a place of welcome and acceptance and the love of God?

I think we can do a better job putting that trumpet to our lips, don’t you? We can start – and by that I mean you can start! – by making sure our calendar of volunteer greeters and coffee hour hosts is full. We can start by vowing – each and every one of us – that no one will come and go from the church on a Sunday morning without being talked to. No one will dwell here feeling alone in the crowd.

There is too much in Christianity today that is closing the door, passing judgment, rejecting and marginalizing souls God loves. We need to blow a louder and clearer trumpet. We need to put to our lips the trumpet of welcome.

We need to put to our lips the trumpet of relevance.

By that I mean we need to stand for a religion that actually touches life. All the welcome in the world, however warm it may be, is pointless if we are perceived to be irrelevant in the first place.

Relevance is not a matter of gimmicks or trendy ploys. Rather relevance is a matter of addressing the real needs of real people, including the pressing issues of the day that impinge upon life and ought to be taken up into Christian consideration.

We preachers and Confirmation teachers and other instructors in the church bear much of the blame here. Earlier I said “by we I mean you.” Now I have to say “by we I mean me and others in my kind of role.” How many of us have offered classes and sermon series on subjects like the symbols of the church, the meaning of the colors of the paraments, or – one I have been particularly fond of – the history of the United Church of Christ. I do not want to say there is no meaning or value in those subjects, but why dwell on those when there are other topics of critical importance: racism, the environmental crisis, the gnawing agony of guilt, the need for support when the rug comes right out from under life? We simply cannot traffic in trifles. Karl Barth had it right when he said that the churches are empty whenever they tell people of a tiresome little God.² We have to dare to take up the big subjects that really matter in peoples’ lives. We need to put to our lips the trumpet of relevance.

We need to put to our lips the trumpet of Jesus Christ alive today.

The other day I heard an interview of a beauty pageant winner here in Wisconsin. The interviewer asked the pageant winner to name the best advice she was ever given along her way to becoming a beauty pageant winner. Without skipping a beat or having a moment’s pause, she said, “Be yourself. Just be yourself.” That was the best advice she had received.

There is wisdom in that up to a point, but we have to offer people more. When the student who is bullied at school sits in our pews or church classrooms looking for some strength to face the hallways and cafeteria the next day, we have to have more offer than “Be yourself.” When a guilt-ridden soul goes over the decisions he has made or the actions she has taken and wrings his hands or lowers her head in shame and regret, we have to have more to offer than “Be yourself.” When some person is so shattered by grief that it does not look as though life will ever be whole again, we have to have more to offer than the secular wisdom of the world.

The church can do what worldly wisdom and secular philosophy can’t do. We can put horizons around a soul.³ We are not left to say, “Be yourself.” We can say – and say with the force of a thousand trumpets – Jesus Christ is alive! Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And Christ is with you here, now, and forever. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus the Lord.

We need to become constant and better trumpeters of a message centered in Jesus Christ and tuned to him in every way.

Well I have named three trumpets we should sound, each with a clear note and a loud blast: the trumpet of welcome, the trumpet of relevance, and the trumpet of Jesus Christ alive today. People may still mistake our message and turn from it. We can’t control that. But at least they will not be left to assume what our message is. If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, where is the reveille that awakens, where is the call to duty that summons to muster? The Lord God has

² Halford E. Luccock, *Communicating the Gospel* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 49.

³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Hope of the World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), p. 168.

given us the notes of a divine music. Let us put the trumpet to our lips, and give a distinct voice to the values we hold.