

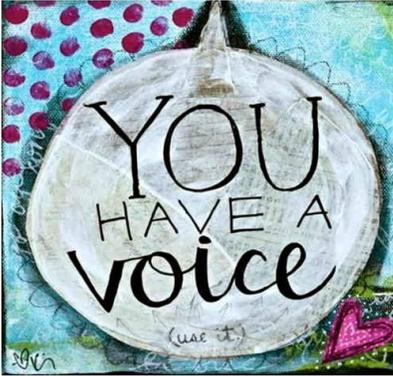
# Church of Me Or Church of We?

James 1:19-27 & Philippians 2:1-5

April 19, 2015 ~ Rev. Jo Ramsey

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If someone asked you to describe our church in just a few words, what would you say? If you had to write down one concern you have for East Union what would it be? If you could voice one hope for our church, what would you share? Whatever you might answer to these three questions would surely reflect your own particular perspective and place here among us.



On Easter Sunday our youth director Sarah Marks invited everyone to East Union's upcoming Cottage Meetings. They're the next step in our Strategic Planning Process, an information-gathering and long-range planning effort intended to set the course for East Union's future. The Cottage Meetings will help the team develop plans for our implementation phase.

Sarah said, "Our church is already pretty great and doing amazing things, but we want to make it even better. This is your chance to let your voice be heard. You can have a say in the future of East Union."

"Yes," I thought, "That's exactly right!" We want people to have a voice at East Union---to have a say! We want to know what you want. We want you to feel invested and involved in what happens here. It's your church and your voice should be heard!

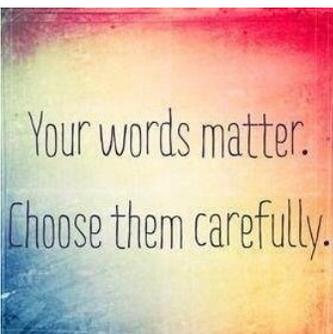
This got me to thinking about our voices---How powerful and important they are. How we use them or don't. Whose voices we hear and whose we don't. What needs to be said, and what doesn't.

It's kind of a theme for us these days. Last Sunday, Pastor James preached about sharing in the early church. Remember, Jack Baker's generous gift to East Union? \$80,000! Jack's gift is his way of saying, "I believe in this church, her mission, her work, her future." Jack has put his money where his mouth is, as they say. Today we have our second cottage meeting, and guess what it's about--Communication! And this coming weekend, we will gather for our Women's Retreat -- called "Let's Talk---How we can use our speech to build better relationships!" See what I mean about a theme?!

God has given each of us a voice. You may sing beautifully, or you may be tone-deaf, but God loves to hear you. You may be a talker or the quiet type, but no matter what, you have something important to say. Your voice is unique, special and beautiful because it is yours.

Like all gifts from God, we can use our voices for good or for bad. We can use our voices to bless others. We can encourage, affirm and uplift. We can teach others, share information, insights, the Good News. We can praise God with our voices. We can join our voices with others and make a difference in our community.

But, we can also hurt others with our voice. We can humiliate, criticize and shame others. And we do it all the time -- all of us. Sometimes, we're just careless and we don't think before we speak. Other times we can't seem to help ourselves even though know we should keep our mouths shut. Almost all of know that feeling of regret, laying awake at night, thinking, "Why did I say that?!? What was I thinking?!" You wish you could take it back, but the damage is already done.



Think for a moment when you've been on the receiving end of hurtful words. It's not easy to forget. I remember in our first church, during a particularly hard winter when we literally had 7 feet of snow and it never got about zero the whole month of January. In fact, our water lines froze so we had to keep our water running for four months.

One Sunday, as I was arriving at church in yet another intense snowstorm, one of the ladies looked me up and down and said, "Don't you own a dress?" I felt so embarrassed. I mumbled something about having lots of dresses, and scooted into my pew. But I never forgot that. I've come to believe that ministers and their families endure more than their fair share of little digs and rude remarks. Ironically, it's often those who consider themselves the most religious, who say the cruelest of things. But I know all of us here have been on the receiving end of harsh words. Everyone can likely think of a remark that still stings.

Before you speak:

**THINK**

**T** = Is it True?  
**H** = Is it Helpful?  
**I** = Is it Inspiring?  
**N** = Is it Necessary?  
**K** = Is it Kind?

Words have power. They are like seeds that we sow. For better or worse, they take root and grow. Every day, we can decide to sow seeds of discord or seeds that inspire. We offer healing or cause hurt. Every time we open our mouths, especially when we're in a group, we need to think before we speak. Is this true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? Is it kind? THINK – get it? Leaders in the church need to be especially careful about what they choose to say and consider how it might impact people. We have a special responsibility.

The Bible has a lot to say about our words. Proverbs 12 says, "Rash words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." And almost the entire book of James, which the Seekers class has studied all spring, focuses on our tongues and what we say and do.



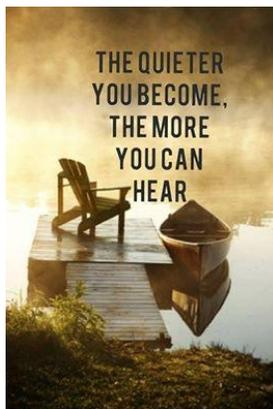
God understands that sometimes we have difficult things to say, and that conflict and confrontation are inevitable. The Bible says we should speak the truth in love. Matthew writes that we should go to another in private to resolve conflict. Yes sometimes, we need to share hard truths, painful issues or strong opinions. That's ok. But, we must be respectful. We need to think about how others might hear our words. We need to be sensitive to other's feelings.

Of course, there are some among us who never say much at all—good or bad. They're quiet; you don't hear their voices much. (You know who you are.) You may have a lot to say, but you hold it in. Perhaps, you're naturally quiet and shy. Or you figure if you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything. Some of you grew up believing your voice didn't matter. Others learned your 'no' didn't count.

Well, in this family--our East Union church family---your voice counts. Just like regular families, our church needs to be a place where everyone's voice is heard, where everyone's opinion matters. And if we are to be a church where your voice is heard, we need to be a church that well.... LISTENS!



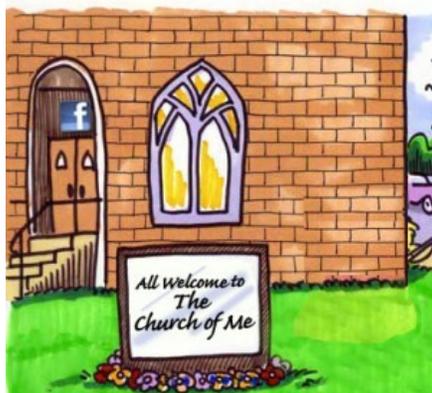
Listening isn't easy. Listening is not the same as waiting for your turn to talk. To listen well, we need to tune in, pay attention, look at someone's face (and not our phone). To really hear, we must try to understand what the other person is trying to say, and not assume we already know. We might ask for clarification, and repeat things back to make sure we're getting it. A good listener doesn't overact, tries not to take everything personally, listens to the feelings behind the words. But, there is another crucial key to active listening. You have to be quiet. In fact, the words 'listen' and 'silent' are spelled with the same six letters.



Here at East Union, there are strong feelings and many diverse voices---especially about things like music style, and where and when we worship. Some people like traditional hymns, others are inspired by contemporary praise songs. Some like the sanctuary, others who prefer the gym, Founder's Chapel or the pavilion. Some think church can only happen at 11 a.m. on Sundays and others like the early morning. We also have the needs of our Faithful Followers, children, youth and home bound members to consider.

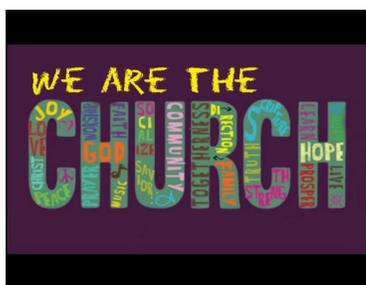
Not only do we need to listen to each other. We need to listen to God. That's what church is all about – hearing God's word, listening for the still, small voice of God within our hearts, tuning into what God might have to say to you, to me, to us.

You may remember last year we created a video about East Union---“I Am East Union Church.” It features many members of our church--young and old, new and long-time members, as well as our many programs and mission projects. The idea is that each and every one of us is East Union church. You are...we are...I am. There is no ‘they’ at East Union. No ‘they’ as in “They decided to change this” or “they chose to purchase that.” They are we, we are they! We are East Union Church. We can make it what we want it to be---that is, what we believe God is calling this church to be.



The question is...what church are we going to be? The Church of Me or the Church of We? Is this about MY voice? What suits ME? What feeds ME? MY way or the highway?

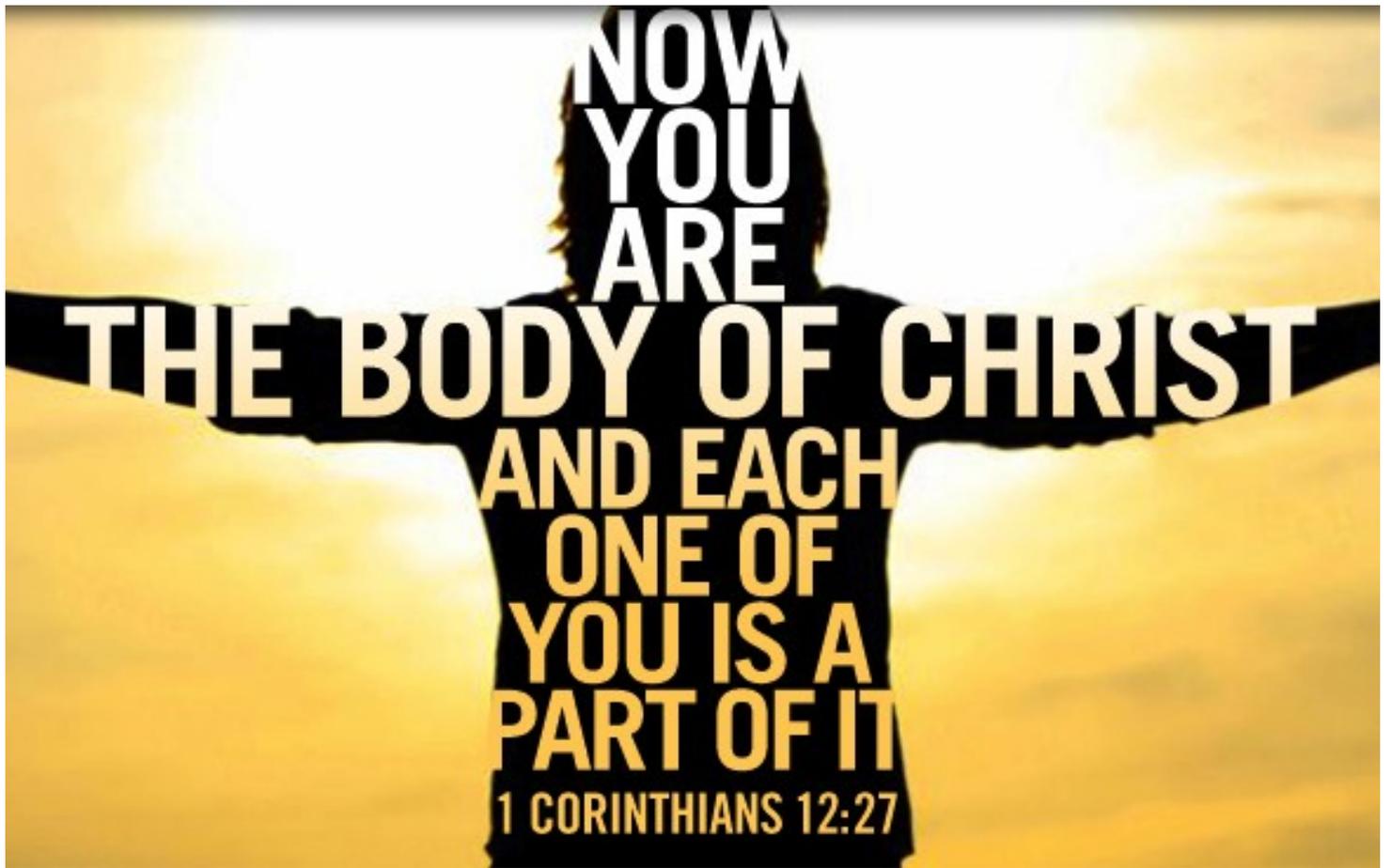
East Union is not the Church of Me. It's not the church of James or Jo or Carol McCaskey or anyone else. The trinity we worship is not me, myself and I. It is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



WE are East Union Church and WE are here because God has called us here. God stands at the center of all we do – It is God who we worship with our hymns and praise songs, who we taste in the bread and cup, God who we serve at IHN and the Men's Shelter, and in West Virginia and Haiti, who we welcome to our preschool and our breakfasts. It is all about God, incarnate in our very world and alive at East Union Church.



WE are the church of WE...where we value every voice, especially the forgotten and silent, where we think before we speak, where we choose to sow seeds of inspiration and affirmation. The church of we...where we listen to one another, really listen, and don't just wait for our turn to talk, and where we listen for God's voice calling us into a promising future filled with hope.



We are God's church, the Body of Christ here on earth. We are made one in him—not because we think alike or agree about everything or find the same things inspiring. We are made one because we share one hope, one faith, one Lord.

God has called to you, to me, to we, and we listen to His voice. Which means we also listen to each others' voices. And ultimately, we lift all of our voices to him in praise, knowing that he is listening and hears us. So, let our many voices become one and join the song that never ends!

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.