

“You’re On Mute”

I Peter 3:15-18

Series: Hope Rising Week 5. Certain Hope

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

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One year ago most of us were scaling the steep learning curve of Zoom. Along the way, we all made mistakes. Ron Ponton never expected his simple mistake on Zoom would make him a worldwide celebrity on the worldwide web. The Texas lawyer logged into a Zoom courtroom...as a furry white cat. This catastrophe was caused by a filter he couldn't turn off. The cat literally got his tongue. He promised Judge Roy Ferguson he meant no disrespect, that he was not actually a cat, but he was prepared to go forward as a feline. Finally Ron was able to get the filter off and the case continued. Judge Ferguson did punish Ponton...by letting the cat out of the bag. He posted a video of the catty attorney on the internet. It went more viral than Covid. Ron didn't mind. He just smiled like the Cheshire cat.

Here's another Zoom mistake I make almost every day. It happens in the middle of a Zoom Bible study. Just after I present a detailed analysis of Scripture, giving a masterful explanation of the historical context and hermeneutical interpretation with carefully philological studies of the original Greek and Hebrew words, I finish to receive an awed silence from my microchurch members. Then someone says, “You’re Muted.”

Many Christians are muted. We attend worship, participate in Growth Groups and Microchurches, engage in mission projects, help lead ministries. Yet when it comes sharing why we believe and follow Jesus, to inviting a friend to follow Jesus – we suddenly get silent. Why are we on mute? One word: fear. We are afraid of what people will say or how they will react. They may reject us, avoid us, stop being our friend. Besides, we say, my faith is just my opinion. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. I shouldn't try to force my personal preference on someone else. But let's think about it differently. If I suddenly discovered the cure for cancer, would I keep it to myself? Should I say, “It's just my opinion. I don't want to force a cure on someone else. Let them find their own cure. That's the tolerant thing to do.” No. You would do whatever it takes to get them that cure. Jesus offers us a guaranteed cure for an even deadlier spiritual disease: sin. Cancer kills the body but sin destroys the soul. The Gospel is not your opinion or mine. It doesn't belong to either of us. It is the cure God gives for sin. We simply administer the cure. What's more, salvation is not just about the hereafter. God has abundant power and peace that He longs to pour into everyone here and now.

So how do we get past the fear? Peter gives us this powerful direction on how to apply God's cure. He writes,

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. I Peter 3:15

First: **Be Right with the Lord.** Make Christ the only Lord of your life. You cannot give away what you don't have. The first step, according to Peter, is declare Christ the Lord of your heart and the owner of your life. That requires you to clean out all the other lords, gods and idols that try to control your heart. Fall in love with Jesus. "No one can serve two masters," Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24). Why is this essential? The number one criticism of Christians is hypocrisy. We say one thing and do another. How does this happen? We serve two or more masters and everyone knows it. You and I must decide up front who we follow: Jesus or other masters. Peter says when you follow Jesus alone you keep "a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (I Peter 3:16).

Second, **Be Ready to Give an Answer.** Imagine you are dropping your friend off at the airport. You know your friend does not believe in God. You have five minutes before your friend begins the check in procedure. Suddenly your friend turns to you and asks, "Why are you a Christian?" What would you say? Are you prepared to give an answer for the hope you have in Christ? You do not have to memorize a lot of Bible verses although that helps. The New Testament is extremely important. But at that moment the "You Testament" is what your friend wants to know. Why are you a Christian? How did you become a Christian? What difference has Christ made in your life? What difference can He make in your friend's life? Here is a simple way to prepare your story: 1. What was your life like before Jesus? 2. How did you become a follower of Jesus? 3. What is your life like now that you follow Jesus?

As for Scripture: John 3:16 is a very simple Bible verse anyone can remember. Peter gives us another one here:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit. I Peter 3:18

It's all packed into this verse: Who saves us: *Christ*. What did He do: *died for sins*. How many times: *once*. Who did He die for: *all*. Why did He do it: *To bring you to God*. How did He do it: *He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit*.

Pastor Timothy Johnson was going through security screening at Baltimore Washington International airport before catching a flight. The screener politely asked him to step back as he looked through Tim's bags. As the screener unloaded things, unzipped pockets, and felt the linings of the bag, Tim noticed the ring on his right hand—a silver ring with a cross on it. Tim mentioned it. He looked briefly at Tim. Then, as he continued searching the bag, he said:

Yeah, the ring. It means I'm a follower of Jesus. You know, in my job, one of the things we worry about is dynamite. But do you know where that word comes from? It's from the Greek word *dunamis*, which means 'power.' As a Christian, I know that all of the power belongs to God. That's why he sent Jesus. So while I'm doing my job, I know that he is doing his job. That's where I put all of my trust. It all belongs to him, and he's here with us. Well, Mr. Johnson, have a great trip.

As the official moved on to the next passenger, Pastor Johnson walked away with a smile, marveling how this man naturally rose to the opportunity to share his faith. It certainly wasn't the place for an extended conversation. There was a long line of people and he had plenty of work to do. But in less than 30 seconds, he shared his faith—calmly, confidently, and without hesitation.¹ He was ready to give an answer.

Third, **Be Respectful and Gentle to Everyone Who Asks.** They say you are not supposed to talk about politics and religion. Yet the Barna Research Group found in a typical week 100 million adults discuss politics and 90 million adults delve into religious or spiritual matters. Their results show that 4 out of every 10 Americans raise spiritual issues or beliefs in a typical week.² If we are praying for God to open up a conversation, if we are prepared to share our story, then it's likely we will have an opportunity to talk with someone about Jesus.

When that opening appears, it is essential for us to be gentle and respectful to those with whom we speak. The Good News about Jesus is the greatest gift you can give anyone. It's best shared through a relationship of love and trust. Inviting a seeker to know Christ takes time, a lot of listening and even more love. You cannot share God's gift of salvation through pushing, arm-twisting, guilt or force feeding.

Be Right with the Lord, Be Ready with an Answer, Be Respectful and Gentle when they ask. That's God's way to share His Good News. The simplest, easiest and most effective way of helping someone become a follower of Jesus is through a personal invitation – to a worship service, to a Growth Group or Microchurch, to participate in a mission project, to VBS, Adventure Club, Sunday School and Youth Group. One simple invitation can change a person's life and the lives of many others.

Sandra Hamilton should have been a follower of Jesus. After all, her grandfather was a pastor. Her parents grew up going to church. Yet, for whatever reason, when Ms. Hamilton came along, the family had little contact with a congregation except for an occasional Sunday School here or Vacation Bible school there. Sandra could have used God's help in those early years. Stricken with polio, her recovery was both strenuous and miraculous. Once her treatments were finished, she was told vigorous exercise would be best. So she poured lots of hours into dancing and then cheerleading. But not church.

All that changed when Ms. Hamilton reached 7th grade. A fellow cheerleader named Becky asked her to spend the weekend at her home so they could practice their cheers. She also invite her to Sunday worship. Becky's church, Calvary Baptist, held an Anniversary Sunday service and each member was asked to invite someone outside the church who did not attend another church.

Becky invited Sandra and she accepted. Sandra was touched by the Lord during the worship service and joined the church that day. She knew very little about Jesus but her young heart responded without hesitation. Ultimately, Sandra invited her whole family to follow the Lord and they were exceedingly blessed.

¹ Timothy Johnson, Bowie, Maryland.

² Four Out of Ten Adults Discuss Religious Matters During the Week (6-9-03).

Sandra Hamilton – or as we know her – Sandy Weigold is a deeply committed follower of Jesus who currently leads and shepherds three Growth Groups here at Woodside – two of which are in nursing homes. She constantly shares the hope within her with gentleness and respect. Sandy says, “I will always thank my friend Becky and her family who simply invited me to share worship and changed my life for eternity.”

That one invitation from a 7th grade cheerleader set off a chain reaction of faith, hope and love that continues to multiply through Sandy Weigold. When it came to sharing the hope within her, thank God Becky was not on mute.

Are you?