

Text: Romans 16:1-2

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.”

Let me tell you for a minute about Mrs. Shea. Mrs. Shea was my 12th-grade AP English teacher. Mrs. Shea had an unenviable job, which was to teach Austen and Shakespeare and Hemingway to 17-year-olds and to do it during the last period of the day, about 2 in the afternoon, when all we wanted to do was to stare out the window and long for freedom. On a spring afternoon, you could look right out the windows of that classroom and see the world beckon to you, you could daydream about the afternoon to come, you could quite easily just find yourself staring at the inside of your eyelids. And I suppose that by stereotype the teacher in her position who succeeds does so with all kinds of charisma and pyrotechnics. Movie clips. Skits. Songs and dance routines. Celebrity guest stars. Anything to keep the kinds entertained and awake. But Mrs. Shea had none of that. In fact, you could barely hear her talk.

Mrs. Shea spoke in barely a whisper. She had this breathy voice, not sultry, just quiet, like you had to work to hear what she said. And it wasn't naive, or timid. She'd been around for a long time, she had at least twenty-five years in the classroom under her belt by time we got to her. She had nerves of steel and a spine to match. That was the magic of it. She spoke in barely a whisper, but we heard every word. It was simple. It was crisp. It was piercing. She made you lean in. The best story about Mrs. Shea actually comes from a few grades above me, and it's been told so many times who knows whether it has any truth left in it. The story is that the class was reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where Austen pokes rather candidly at some of the class struggle happening in pre-industrial England. Mrs. Shea is reading to the class from one of Austen's more pointed passages, and, sensing that perhaps the class is beginning to wander, she lowers the book briefly, announces, in her dulcet whisper, “In other words, kids, Jane Austen is a bleeping communist!” (although she did not say “bleeping”), at which point she throws her copy of the book across the room, where it slams into the far wall and whimpers down onto the floor. She then picks up *another copy of Pride and Prejudice* sitting on her desk, flips open to the identical page, and, without missing a beat, keeps reading. And immediately the entire class is awake.

All of which is to say. You can say a lot with a whisper. If you can teach people how to listen. I think Phoebe knows this all too well. All summer at UPC we've been reading stories about things that happen in church, but this morning we're not really reading the story of Phoebe. There's no story here. Phoebe is the story. We're at the end of the letter to the Romans, Paul's theological magnum opus. This is a church he's never met, so this letter is his overture from afar to the early church in the very seat of Roman power. It's a big deal. And then here at the end, when he's done with all the systematic theology, when he gets down to the formalities. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church...”

Why is Paul commending somebody to this church he doesn't even know? The only explanation is that Phoebe herself has been sent with the letter. Paul hasn't brought it himself, we know that much. The most likely reason for Paul to be commending this woman about whom the Roman

church would otherwise not care is that she's the one standing there giving them the letter. But then remember again that literacy rates are not high, and that this letter would originally have been delivered orally. Somebody is going to stand in front of this threadbare worshipping community and read the letter to the Romans, for the first time, and in all likelihood that person is Phoebe. She's carried it halfway across the known world. She risked life and limb to bring it into the heart of the empire. And she's the one standing in front of this church, reading these words for the first time. They get to hear them in her voice.

Maybe it's not a whisper. Maybe it's not soft at all. But I doubt entirely that it's the voice that early church is used to. That is, if the early Roman church is anything like our churches, then the first thing anybody will say about having a woman read them the Gospel is that something is wrong with her voice. I have to tell you that I have heard this story a thousand times from dozens of women pastors, time and again, and what they hear after they get up to lead worship is that something is wrong with their voice. *It's too quiet, I couldn't hear what you were saying. It's so shrill, it's like you're yelling. I can't make out what you're trying to say. It's so high-pitched. It sounds so squeaky.* The reality is that when women get into the pulpit, especially in a pulpit that has never had a woman for any length of time, their voices don't sound right, not to those ears. According to those ears, those women's voices need to be fixed. *You need voice lessons*, the women I talked to all hear the same thing. *You need voice lessons*, which could be true, from time to time, but I've never heard it said to a male colleague. *You need voice lessons*, because if you're a woman standing in the pulpit, we can't hear what you have to say.

But maybe we just need to learn to listen. You can say a lot, even with a whisper. If people listen. I think about Phoebe, getting up in front of this church with this letter. It's Paul's masterwork, and he knows it. You can't oversell this moment. She's giving the debut performance of the single most important document in this history of the Christian church. Love and wrath, sin and law, justification and grace, Israel and the Gentiles, the church and the world, it's all here, but it won't mean anything until she reads it. And yet. It's not incidental to the message of this Gospel, this message about the unyielding power of God's grace, that it comes in the voice of someone least expected. Least typical. Maybe, amid the sound and the fury of the height of the imperial city, maybe the Gospel itself can only sound like a whisper, and here it is, **because the truest thing isn't always the loudest thing.** And we just need to learn to listen. And if we can't listen to every voice, that's on us. Because the Gospel always comes on the voices of those we least expect. Because the Gospel always comes from the people we least expect. Because the Gospel gets whispered.

It can be hard to hear it over the sound of storms and gusty winds, like the tree squeaking up against my house for the last 36 hours. It can be hard to hear it over the storms and gusty winds of our political and cultural lives, all the punditry, all the talking-heads, all the fervor and all the clamor and all the anger and all the wrath. It can be hard to hear the Gospel in such loud times. And yet it will be heard. Phoebe will be heard. Over the gusty winds and the shrieking rain. Over the sirens and the shouting and over all the sound and fury of these days. Phoebe will be heard. If you listen, you can hear her now, deep in the heart of empire, under the cover of darkness, this church gathering to proclaim something other than the lordship of Rome, something other than the rhetoric of war and conquest, something other than the supremacy of death. If you listen, you can hear her now, deep in the heart of the empire; in my imagination she's about up to chapter 8,

she's been reading a long time, her voice has gone a little hoarse, she needs water, she needs a break, but not as much as the world needs to hear what she has to say, not as much as the world needs this gospel, not as much as the world needs its love, not as much as the world needs its hope. *Who will separate us from the love of Christ?* she reads, and she knows this is the heart of it, but they're drifting off. *Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

Are they listening? I hope so. Are we listening? I'm not so sure. Is this the moment where she throws something across the room and sends it whimpering down the wall? Just maybe. This Gospel will be heard. Phoebe will be heard. God will be heard. *Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?* No! *In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Are we awake now? Can we hear this good news? Can we listen to the whisperings of peace? Can we listen to the whisperings of justice? Can we listen to the gospel of some lord beyond death? And can we hear it in Phoebe's voice? Can we hear it in this soft persistent insistent whisper? Can we hear it in the voices of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged? The truest thing is not always the loudest thing. Can we listen?

You will remember a night last summer when a shooter opened fire on a cluster of Dallas police and brought the city to a standstill. It was the end of one of those weeks when the world feels like a powder keg, and surely even more so on the ground in Dallas, where the tension in the air ran thick and the storm winds blew powerfully loud. And then, somewhere across town, while the city was coming to a standstill, the Texas Rangers lost 10-1. This, of course, does not really matter. But it did prompt [one of the better commentaries on the day](#) by a local ABC sportswriter named Levi Weaver. In fact, his game recap of Thursday night's game, in which he narrates the quiet panic that swirled through the Ballpark at Arlington as shots rang out downtown. In fact, the headline reads: "This Does Not Matter: Rangers Lose 10-1." To be honest, it's not much of a game recap. He doesn't feel like talking about baseball. Instead, way over there in the sports section, instead, he wants to whisper. "There are things to remember in times like this," Weaver writes, "things that get lost in the back-and-forth. They are the quiet things that whisper truth in the middle of a tug-of-war for your ears. Here is the whisper: *Love is hard. Hope is hard. Broad Generalizations are easy. Reaction is easy. Love your enemies.*"

*Here is the whisper: Love is hard. Hope is hard. Love your enemies. Amen.*