

“The Voice We Listen To”

Psalm 23 & John 10:22-30 – April 17, 2016

INTRO: In today’s reading, Jesus is at the Temple in Jerusalem. People were there for a Jewish festival, the one we have come to know as Hanukkah. Jesus is questioned by members of the Jewish religious establishment, and he is responding to those questions, trying to clarify exactly who he is.

We have two staff people right now with brand new puppies. I’ve listened to both Jodie and Jackie speak to their dogs, and noticed the qualities of their voices and how their voices change, given specific circumstance. When the dog is doing something good, it’s a soft, affirming voice, and when they are not behaving, it’s a stern, “you’d better listen to me” voice—all of which I can enjoy, because I’m not raising these pups! And fortunately these young pups are starting to understand what they hear—at least sometimes. I propose that it’s not just animals who can figure out the authority figure in their worlds, people also need to do the same.

I remember at one church, I was getting ready for a memorial service, and looked out the front door of the church to find two employees of a lawn service company applying weed killer and fertilizer to my yard, which was right next door. Our church trustees and I had intentionally chosen to not use chemicals on our lawns, so those chemicals didn’t go into the water table and I preferred not having them around my dog. So I raced out the front door of the church, and ran across the yard, my arms waving. That got their attention, and I asked who authorized this work. Well, they didn’t know, but they believed we probably had had this service in the past, and it was just a continuation of a contract. I informed them that I had been there nine years, and during that time we hadn’t contracted for their services. So, the one fellow tells me that he had spoken to a neighbor and she had somehow told him it was OK. To which I responded, sorry to say, in a not very friendly way: “Does the neighbor live in this house? No, I live in this house, and work at this church, and we don’t want these chemicals on our lawns!”

The employee was very apologetic, and asked my name and said he would try to find out what happened. I made a phone call to the chair of the Trustees, to see if she knew of any decision I didn’t know about, and she agreed that we never ordered these lawn treatments. Which left me wondering, who gave the go-ahead for this job? The workers seemed to be willing to listen to anyone in the neighborhood who said it was OK, yet they weren’t listening to anyone with the authority to authorize this job.

Jesus speaks of himself as the voice we are to listen to—the voice of the shepherd who seeks to be the authority in our lives. When the religious authorities gather around Jesus and ask him to tell them whether he is the real Messiah, he is responding to people who are basically saying: “How long are you going to annoy us? Tell us plainly who you are.”

“Jesus tells them that this is exactly what he has already done: he has spoken, and acted, in ways consistent with his purpose of revealing God to them. He has done everything that he can do—that he intends to do, to help them understand, and to call them to faith in God. Yet they find it difficult to believe.” (*Homily Service, 4/07*)

Even though he has told them and shown them as best he can, they don’t believe. If they believed, they would belong to that group of people who have heard Jesus’ voice, and found it authoritative for them, and have responded by following him.

George Whitefield, one of our UM ancestors, long ago said: “Following Christ means following him through life, following him in every word and gesture, following him in thought, word, and work.”

Jesus said that those who hear his voice, follow him, as a flock follows the shepherd. Ed Gentry, a Baptist adult Bible study leader, wrote that: “When he was a kid, they used to go to his grandparents’ dairy farm for a week each summer and each Christmas. Each morning his grandmother would wake up at 4am and head out the pasture to round up the cows and take them to the barn to be milked. Ed will never forget the day he came of age. It was announced that the following morning he would be allowed to get up and go with his grandmother as she performed her duties. By the time grandma was ready to go the next morning, so was Ed...decked out complete with cowboy boots, plastic chaps, genuine leather holster, metal cap gun (spit polished and with a fresh roll of caps all loaded up), bandanna, cowboy hat, and if memory serves him, he was digging around, looking for a piece of rope to be used to wrangle the particularly reluctant ‘doggies’. We can imagine

Ed's surprise, when as they started to walk to the barn, his grandma began to softly call out the cows' names into the darkness. By the time they got to the barn, the first few cows were lining up to come in and get milked. This was NOT how you were supposed to round up cattle. It bothered him for a long time. Later in life, as Ed and his class studied Psalm 23, the memory of his childhood came rushing back. He has now imaged God as gently calling our names out in the dark as we walk through life. Ed may personally think cattle prods might be much more effective, but Jesus affirms, 'My sheep know my voice and I know them, and they follow me.'" *(Christianity Today, 10/26/98)*

Jesus said to those religious authorities, I've been here, living among you, and all people have needed to do is watch and listen. Those who have believed, have found something that speaks to their hearts. They are those who are part of my flock.

"There are many voices which tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality. By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status with God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd. The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, 'Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.' It says, 'You belong to me already. No one can take you out of my hand.' Secure in this belonging, we are free to live an abundant life. Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the good shepherd is a voice of promise -- a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God's own." *(Elisabeth Johnson)*

Think of "the child afraid for her safety at home, the spouse victimized by domestic violence, the college student who wonders whether there will be any jobs after graduation, the person fearful of being stopped by police because of his skin color, the police officer who never knows what will happen when she arrives on the scene, the retiree with no idea of what to do without a career, the refugee without a home, in all those situations we are still God's own. There are so many times when life conspires to make us feel unsafe and unworthy, yet in the face of these harsh realities there is the even greater reality of God's, unconditional and unyielding love. No matter how crazy or difficult or stressful or scary our lives, God chooses us, loves us, accompanies us. *(David Lose)*

We need an authoritative voice in our lives, which we can follow, which says something different than we hear many other places, and something contrary to the competing voices of our culture. And we need to get more accustomed to listening. "We get our moral bearings by looking at and listening to God. We must begin with God." *(A.W. Tozer)*

I've sung in a number of choirs over the years and I am continually amazed when people in those choirs refuse to watch the director. They have their noses buried in the music, I guess thinking the only aspect to singing is singing the notes. The director is in front of the choir, to help them be a choir, not just individual voices singing willy nilly. The director is there, with the choir's best interest at heart and a bigger picture of who that choir can become. So why don't we pay attention, listen to the director, if their leadership could help us produce something more wonderful? Maybe for the same reason we don't listen for God's guidance. We have our noses buried in the stuff of everyday life and we just see what's in front of us.

"A sports reporter was covering a high school swim meet for the first time. During each of the races, he kept hearing a high-pitched squeal coming from somewhere in the natatorium, but he couldn't quite figure out where or from whom. He assumed it was an excited parent or a proud boyfriend or girlfriend. After the meet, the reporter was interviewing a young man who had qualified for the state-level competition when he asked, 'You don't happen to know whose parents were making that high-pitched squealing noise, do you?' The young man laughed, 'Oh that, no, that's not a parent. That's our coach! She gets real excited when we swim well and she starts to squeal. In fact, it's so loud we can hear her underwater. It's kinda cool because when we hear her, we know we're winning.' *(Her voice encouraged them on.)*" *(Emphasis, May/June 2004)*

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that can comfort and can call our names softly in the night. And it's also a voice that challenges and encourages us to grow and keeps us going.

"Life itself is a process whereby we become increasingly able to recognize Christ's voice and follow, or we become enamored with our own voice, or the voices of the world, and reject his call.

Every day we must practice listening, every day we must place ourselves so we can hear his call, or we may come to mistake our voices for his.” (Jerry Goebel)

There are many voices which clamor for our attention. Know that Christ’s voice may be much like that grandma calling the cows by name—just naming our names—letting us know that we belong to a God—absolutely belong to the God who wants the very best for our lives and probably hopes we might listen more.

--Sue Burwell