

Knowing the Voice

from the pulpit of
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by
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John 10:1-11

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am

the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Most of us assume that in the animal world, sheep are not among the brightest of God’s creatures. However, there are some distinguishing characteristics about the nature of sheep that are worth our consideration in light of these familiar scripture readings. One thoughtful writer, who happens also to be a shepherd, points out how sheep are moved from place to place. While cows are herded from the rear (think cowboys cracking whips) that will not work for sheep – at all. Stand behind sheep making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led; they need to be led.

Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else, namely their shepherd, does not go ahead of them to show them that everything is all right. Sheep grow fond of their shepherds and trust them. A shepherd can walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step one foot in the fold without causing pandemonium. Sheep act like their shepherds are part of the family, and the relationship between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own – that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, and the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two-note song signals that it is time to go home.

In Palestine today, you can still witness a scene that Jesus almost certainly saw two thousand years ago, of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from various pastures where they have grazed during the day. Often multiple flocks will end up at the same watering hole

around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together – eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, though, because when it is time to go home, each one issues his - or her - own distinctive call, and that one shepherd's flock will withdraw from the crowd to follow its own shepherd home.¹ They know to whom they belong, because they know their shepherd's voice. Knowing the voice is key to understanding who we are in relationship to God, and when it comes to knowing the voice of Jesus, it takes time, attention and the practice, of listening carefully.

Just a couple of days ago I heard a radio news story about noise pollution in our National Parks causing problems for all kinds of wildlife. Researchers at the University of Colorado have spent years setting out microphones in natural areas across the country and recording the sounds of nature – wind, rain, birdsong, flowing streams and rivers, even the bubbling mud-pots in Yellowstone Park. Now they can measure the decibel levels of the natural backgrounds along with the more intrusive sounds of human activity – like road traffic, passing airplanes, mining or logging, which has become more than double the volume of the natural sounds. In some areas the unnatural sounds are ten times as loud as the natural background is supposed to be. The concern, of course, is that noise pollution is interfering with the sounds animals need to hear – to maintain their life, like foraging for food, mating calls, or listening for signs of danger. Noise pollution is literally a matter of life and death.²

Making the analogy to our life as Sheep of God's Pasture, I wonder what sounds have intruded into our human sphere that may be drowning out our ability to hear and to recognize the Voice of Jesus.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Voice of the Shepherd," The Preaching Life, p. 140-141.

² NPR.org, 5/4/17.

One voice says: *Life is short and then you die. Enjoy what you can; take what you want.* Another voice says: *The very next thing you buy will make you happy.* One voice says: *You just cannot trust other sheep, they are out to get you. Look out for number ONE.* Another voice says: *A life with God should not be so complicated. Follow me and I will make it easy.* One voice says: *We have a plan that will fix everything.* Another voice says: *There is no hope that anything can change.*

Every day, very loud voices are clamoring for our attention, and they can drown out the voice of the Good Shepherd. The community of John's gospel struggled to discern the voice of Jesus Christ among all the other voices. These were early Jewish Christians, who believed in Jesus, and at first exercised that belief within the synagogue. But eventually they found themselves in intense conflict with others who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. In the context of their social, political and religious conflict, John's gospel asserts that trusting in Jesus Christ leads to the abundant life Christ offers, here and now. Christ is the Shepherd whose voice is recognized by the sheep. His sheep are able to recognize and follow that single, trustworthy voice. Christ is also the Gate of the sheepfold through whom the sheep may enter into safety and protection and go out into the risky world.

Now, the exclusive claim of this text must be handled with care when it says only the sheep that belong to Jesus will be saved. One of my theology professors at Union seminary, Donald Dawe, who worked on interfaith dialogue from a strong Christian stance said: "When we use John 10 in preaching and teaching, we are standing at the heart of Christian faith. It is both a place of power, and of peril. If we misapply this text, we will only end in sanctifying our prejudices and in vilifying people different from ourselves. However, if we apply it rightly, we will speak a liberating word for those whose lives cry out for a center other than themselves, or the idols the world is so ready to supply."

In a world in which the voices calling to us daily have become deafening like noise pollution, may we attend to Knowing the Voice of

the One to whom we belong for knowing the voice of Christ well frees us to welcome and accept others. The Annual Meeting of the Congregation today is our yearly celebration of being the Sheepfold of Jesus Christ together. We will distribute the written Annual Report which tells of the highlights of the past year, and we'll hear some statistics about membership and mission and money. All together – the photographs of a vibrant congregation learning, working and growing together, the numerical signs of good financial health and faithful stewardship, and the trust these represent that we are positioning the church for a bright future – all come back to knowing the voice.

Everything that Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church is and does, is underscored by a deep commitment to discern the voice of the Shepherd who calls and nurtures disciples of Jesus Christ. That voice is dependable. It resonates with something we have already grown to love and trust. It touches something deep within us, and in a world of noise pollution, with focused attention we can discern its truth. In times of distress and pain and anxiety about the world, that familiar voice comforts us saying, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”* When our faith falters and our vision grows dim, that voice reassures us: *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you.”* When we are uncertain of life's purpose, confused about what is good and true, that voice calls us saying: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* Even when we stand on the rim of death's canyon, staring with grief into its depths, this voice speaks to us of hope: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”*

At every bend in the road, in every predicament along the way, if we know the Voice, we will feel Jesus' presence. So in the flurry of voices that fill the world voices of bitterness, judgment, hatred and strife, voices inviting us to be less than we are – the followers of Jesus listen for the sound of the voice we know best, that voice speaks compassionately, mercifully, lovingly and hopefully.

“I came that YOU may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

AMEN.