

Sunday, May 12, 2019
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)
John 10.22-30
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

About 20 years ago, give or take, I was in a mall in Riverside a couple of weeks before Christmas. I had been so busy that I had to take a weekday off so I could do my Christmas shopping. This was before online shopping had become the favored means of commerce. I was in a women's store looking for some things for my mother and my sister. There were obviously the store employees, as well as other shoppers in the store. As a result, there was the sounds of a number of voices. There was also the sound of Christmas music over the speakers, and a myriad of other sounds drifting in from other parts of the mall. All of this mixed together to create a sea of background noise with one single component almost indistinguishable from the rest. I was in the front corner of the store looking at some sweaters, trying to decide which ones to get for Mom and Lisa. All of a sudden, I noticed something vaguely familiar. At first it didn't quite register, but there was something in that background noise that grabbed my attention. I whipped around in the general direction of the seemingly familiar sound. Sure enough, there in the back of the store, probably as far away as the front doors of the church, I saw my mother talking to one of the clerks. My mother does not have a particularly loud voice. Yet, over all the other sounds and voices in the place, hers reached my ears and was recognized.

I'm guessing that most of you who have had similar experiences. You are in a place with lots of people talking. It may be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish particular voices, let alone to make out what is being said by any given individual, unless they are right next to you. But then, despite all the other voices, you clearly hear and can make out the voice of a person who is special to you – spouse, family member, best friend. For some reason, the voices of those who are dear to us can be heard in a way that others cannot. It's almost as if the soundwaves do not just reach our ears where they are processed by our brains, but that there is some aspect of that voice that touches our hearts, as well. Maybe even our souls.

I think this is the same phenomenon that Jesus describes about those who follow him in today's Gospel reading. The temple authorities are interrogating him about his identity as the Messiah. Jesus tells the authorities that they do not believe that he is the Messiah because they do not belong to his flock of sheep. He then says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me" (Jn 10.27). What distinguishes Jesus' followers, his sheep, from those who do not believe in him, is that they are able to hear his voice and to respond. Even over the other competing noises that permeate and inundate our lives.

In this passage, Jesus is likening himself to a shepherd. This imagery of shepherd would have been very familiar to the people of Jesus' day, who would have known shepherds, or at least seen them in the countryside. By likening himself to a good shepherd, Jesus is painting a picture of his pastoral and leadership style. A good shepherd leads his flock, cares for it, and protects it from danger.

The particular quality of a good shepherd that Jesus lifts up is that there is a bond between the shepherd and the sheep. Good shepherds know all their sheep. The shepherd can tell if all his sheep are present or if one of them is missing. He can tell if one of his sheep is not doing well. And the sheep know the shepherd. They know the sound of his voice. It is a sound that is familiar, that is comforting. They will only follow that particular voice, precisely because they know it and trust it.

There is also a subtle reference that may be lost on us—a cultural and religious reference that would have been very familiar to the Jews of Jesus' time. Jesus uses religious language that was historically used by the Jewish people, in which they liken themselves to God's sheep. Language implying that they are the chosen of God, who leads them and cares for them, just as a good shepherd leads and cares for his sheep. So in using this language, Jesus is claiming for his own followers the rights and privileges previously only thought to be afforded to God's Chosen People. Jesus was effectively redefining who are chosen. Who are beloved of God.

As those who follow Jesus, we are his sheep. We know Jesus' voice. Of course, 2,000 years after his death, we don't hear it as an actual, human voice with our ears. But we do hear his voice through the words of Scripture. We hear his voice conveyed through the testimony of the disciples who witnessed Jesus' Resurrection. We hear it through the lives of people of faith who have passed his message on throughout history until it reaches our ears and our hearts. We hear his voice in the traditions and teachings of the Church, which are meant to amplify our reception and clarify our understanding of his message. And perhaps most personal, we hear his voice in the presence of others who have been there to provide us with the right words at the right time—when we are most in need of guidance, encouragement, or comfort.

In his testimony to the temple authorities, Jesus goes on to say, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (Jn 10.28). This further emphasizes the point that by providing his followers with eternal life, he is indeed the Messiah. Now, the Jewish understanding of Messiah did not include the idea that the Messiah would die for his followers. Nor would the Messiah provide eternal life. He would be a great political and military figure who would liberate the people and reestablish the Kingdom of Israel. But Jesus' understanding was different. It was one that melded the humanness of the Jewish Messiah with the divinity of God. This would allow for the Messiah to not just provide liberation from a foreign oppressor, but liberation from the ultimate enemies—sin and death. This would allow for the Messiah to not just reestablish the homeland of the people, but to establish a new home, an eternal home, with God.

This side of the Resurrection, particularly in our celebration of the Easter season, we recognize just how this new understanding of Messiah works. We recognize how this promise of eternal life is fulfilled. That it is through the death and Resurrection of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, that we achieve eternal life. That through his death and Resurrection, he has defeated sin and death on our behalf, opening the way for fulfillment of his promise of eternal life.

When we think of the Good Shepherd, we more often think of the parable of the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep and going in search of the one that has wandered away. In today's Gospel, rather than focus on the individual, Jesus emphasizes the entire flock. That our faith is wrapped up with belonging. Belonging to Jesus, but also belonging to a larger body. But that does not diminish the specialness that our Lord places on the individual. In fact, he seems to touch on this when he says, "What my Father has given me is greater than all else" (Jn 10.29). We who follow Jesus are a great treasure, of greater value than anything else that God has created. This is evidenced by the fact that Jesus was willing to die for us. Not that he was willing to die for humanity in general. But that he was willing to die for each of us, individually. Because we are each a true treasure in the eyes of Christ and in the eyes of God.

There is a wonderful story from the early Church that illustrates this point. During the middle of the third century, Laurence was chief of the seven deacons of the church in Rome. These were the men responsible for administering the church's finances, particularly with respect to the care of the poor. In 257, Emperor Valerian began a persecution of the church, primarily targeting the clergy and laity of the upper classes. Church property was confiscated and meetings of Christians were forbidden. Pope Sixtus II and most of the clergy in Rome were executed on August 7, 258.

The Roman prefect, knowing that Laurence was in charge of the church's finances, promised to spare his life if he would surrender the wealth of the Church to the Roman authorities. Laurence agreed, but said it would take him three days to gather it. During that time, he distributed as much of the Church's remaining property and wealth to the poor as possible, to prevent it from being seized by the prefect. On the third day, Laurence assembled the sick, the aged, the poor, the widows and orphans of the church in Rome and presented them to the prefect, saying, "These are the treasures of the Church." The prefect was outraged and ordered Laurence to be roasted alive on a gridiron. Legend has it that Laurence bore the torture with great composure, saying to his executioners at one point, "You may turn me over; I am done on this side." Laurence's courage made a great impression on the people of Rome, resulting in many converting to Christianity and greatly reduced the belief among pagans that Christianity was an undesirable movement that needed to be eradicated. In Laurence's actions, many others in Rome came to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

While we are the sheep listening for the voice of and following our shepherd, we are so much more than that. As those who follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, you are the treasures of the church. And as such, as valued members of the flock, each of us is entrusted with Christ's message, with being a conduit through which his voice is proclaimed so that others may come to hear it, as well. The example of your life, the sound of your voice, is often the means by which others come to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, by which others come to recognize his voice. That is the awesome power, the awesome responsibility, that each of us carries. For you never know who might hear your voice, and in it recognize the voice of the One who loves and treasures them beyond all else.