

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter | April 17, 2016

Pastor John Schwehn

Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30

Grace and Peace to you from God our Mother and our Father, and from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me begin by saying once more what a joy it is for me to be with you here at Christ the King! Thank you for calling and welcoming me into this body of Christ in New Brighton – I am so excited to begin walking this journey of faith with all of you!

In the months to come, I look forward to meeting more of you and hearing your stories. As we venture forward in relationship together, you will learn to recognize my voice, and I will learn to recognize each of yours.

And this ability to learn and to recognize voices is one that we as people do rather naturally, whether we wish to or not.

Think, for example, of an important person in your own life. Any person. This person could be long dead or this person could be sitting right next to you right now.

Either way, try to recall the pitch, the texture, and the expressiveness of that person's voice. You can do it, I'm sure...and hearing this voice even in your mind likely brings you feelings of deep comfort, or love, or grief, or joy. Voices are powerful things.

Now let's try this exercise again, but this time I will invite you instead to conjure up in your mind the voice of one of our current presidential candidates! Never before has there been a more characteristic range of loud and distinctive voices!

Bernie, Trump, Clinton, Cruz...In our sound-byte world, we know their voices intimately, whether we want to or not. Perhaps you feel called to follow one of these voices; and, more than likely, some of these voices are making you squirm in your seat right now.

So then let's talk about Jesus. He says: "The sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." Perhaps it's due to our propensity to hear and to follow voices that we are so commonly compared to sheep throughout the Bible.

In Jesus' time – and today – shepherds would commonly take their separate flocks to the same pasture to graze or to drink, and these shepherds would not panic when their flock of white and wooly animals got all mixed together with another shepherd's flock of identical white and wooly animals.

When it came time to go, a shepherd would simply shout out his characteristic call and his small flock would run to his voice, separating themselves from the rest of the sheep that followed other shepherds, sheep that obeyed other voices.

Jesus says, "The sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

My friends, we are sheep. And, with Jesus as our shepherd, this is very good news. As the body of Christ, we are a flock that follows the voice of truth, of love, and of good news for all people. The challenge with being sheep, however, is that we are surrounded by a cacophony of *other, louder* voices every single day! To whom do we listen? Whose voices do we follow? What does the voice of Jesus even sound like?

Remember, our gospel story today *begins* with a few people cornering Jesus in the temple: "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," they demand. Today we demand the same things from the voices we seek to follow. "Give us an answer!" we bleat. No more parables, no more mystery, no more miracles...just *tell us plainly, Jesus!* Tell us how to follow you. Give us the answers for how to live a happy life! Give us a formula we can follow for being good people, for finding life's purpose, for self-improvement! Baaaaa, baaaaa, baaaaaa.

And there are voices in our world – loud voices – that claim to provide just that! Want to save your marriage? Here are ten simple steps you can follow! Want to make more money fast? Here's a secret way to do that! Want to win over more people? Well then try changing these six things about yourself! Want to eliminate fear? Let's ban Muslims and immigrants from entering the country!

We hear these voices, and we're tempted to follow because the solutions they provide sound so...easy. But, my friends, the promises of God do not work this way! God's promises come to us in surprising, and sometimes challenging, ways. The voice of our shepherd gives us an identity, speaks words of grace, and calls us into the messiness and beauty of a world that will never conform to any single self-improvement platform.

Take the flock of Tabitha, for example. Here in the book of Acts we have the perfect model for what a flock shaped by a deep faith looks like. We hear that a woman named Tabitha became ill and died. She is called a disciple, and she was known far and wide for her charity.

When she became sick, the flock to which she belonged accompanied her through illness and pain and into her death. When she died, they grieved with one another. They lovingly washed her body, sang songs of hope and lament, and prepared her for burial.

When this flock heard that the Apostle Peter was in town, they sent for him. And it is through Peter's eyes that we begin to understand why Tabitha was so beloved. You see, the flock of Tabitha was entirely made up of widows, who, at that time, were considered among the most vulnerable members of society. Tabitha's life, we learn, had been devoted to clothing these widows, to providing for them, to binding them together into a community of faith.

The story tells us that, as the women wept, they lovingly showed Peter the tunics that Tabitha had made for them while she was alive. These were beautiful, carefully dyed tunics, some of them most likely woven from sheep's wool. *They were clothed in compassion; sheep in sheep's clothing.*

The vocation of this sheep, Tabitha, was to clothe the lost and the least. The voice of her shepherd called her into this ministry, and, upon witnessing what she had done, Peter, we are told, resuscitates her and restores her once more to the community. Tabitha and these widows still will die – this miracle will not make anyone immortal. But the faithful flock to which they belong is eternal, enduring, and will never die.

Jesus says, "The sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

So what does the voice of Jesus sound like? Though we long to follow it, it can sometimes be difficult to hear. But the promise is that we are known by the shepherd even though we may struggle to always know him. When it comes to the life of faith, we do not choose the shepherd; the shepherd has already chosen us, and, as Jesus says, "No one will snatch my sheep out of my hand."

We are in the hands of Jesus, the shepherd...but these are hands that one day will be pierced. Like Tabitha's hands, they are hands that seek to give themselves away, to serve, hands that venture into places of pain and grief. And, by giving themselves away, these hands promise eternal life precisely in these places.

As Christ the King, we are called to give ourselves away. We are called to listen to the voices around us, including the voices from right here within this congregation, this flock. To have faith, to follow the shepherd, is a gift. It is a voice we hear together, as a flock, and we often need one another in order to recognize it. We listen for it out of a deep sense of who we are as sheep, as beloved children whom God has called.

Jesus says, "The sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

So, again...what does the voice of the shepherd sound like? What is the voice that calls us to follow the life of faith?

It is the voice of the middle-schooler being bullied at school, who can't make sense of why he gets picked on all the time even though he tries so hard to be kind.

It is the voice of a parent who struggles to understand where they are being called between work and family, and they reach out for support and prayer and understanding in the midst of hard choices.

It is the voice of the loner, the addict, the depressed, and the oppressed, of the one whose voice is so often not heard, crying out for restoration and justice.

It is the voices of the twelve Syrian refugees whom Pope Francis brought home with him to Rome this weekend from their exile in Greece, where they had fled in desperation.

It is the voices of those grieving widows that Peter hears, and the voices of grief and lament that we hear in our own community, too.

As Christ's flock, we are called to be like sheep, to be drawn to these voices, just as sheep are drawn to the shepherd. This is the call that we hear in faith.

And here, in this place, we hear the voice of our shepherd who gives us this faith. Around the baptismal font we hear the voice say, "I have called you, and you are mine." And at the table we hear the voice saying, "This is my body, this is my blood – given for you!"

Listen to this voice again today, and let it call you. And do not be afraid of it, for we sheep are in the wounded hands of the shepherd, and nothing, *nothing* can snatch us away.

Amen.