

Message for April 30, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“Led Through the Gateway of our Hearts” Rev. Trish Eckert

Once again, for the fourth time in this Easter season, the lectionary turns toward the theme of knowing. Beginning with Easter Sunday, the gospel readings have beckoned us to pay attention to where we pay attention, to how we turn ourselves toward the Christ who comes to us. To the women at the empty tomb, to Thomas in the locked room, to the two at the Emmaus table, Jesus shows himself, inviting others to see and recognize him, even to place their hand within his very flesh so that they may know and trust who he is. John’s text again impresses upon us how keen Jesus is for us to know him, to follow after the One who first knows us.

Both of the Bible Wisdom teachings we heard this morning emphasize sheep and shepherd imagery. Christians are deeply familiar with these images, and yet we tend not to think very highly of sheep. We think of sheep as blind followers, we don’t consider them intelligent, and most of us don’t really want to be thought of as sheep. Whenever I hear a pastor refer to their congregation as their “flock” and talk about “shepherding” them, I cringe. I think many of us bristle at the implication that we are dumb and mindless sheep.

I was interested to find that the writer, teacher, and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, gave a sermon entitled, “The Voice of the Shepherd.” In it, she talks about an acquaintance who had grown up on a sheep ranch and dispelled the myth that sheep are dumb. She explained that it was actually the cattle ranchers who started that rumor, because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from the cowboys. But that does not work with sheep. If you stand behind sheep making noises, they will just run around behind you. They actually prefer to be led. *Cows can be pushed; sheep must be led.* Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else – their trusted shepherd – does not go first, to show them that everything is alright. Taylor explains, quote “Sheep seem to consider their shepherds part of the family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to.” End quote

This reframe is helpful to me - Jesus is speaking to us, his beloved. Jesus upholds our connection and relationship, encouraging us to follow. Sometimes we go astray, just like sheep. Sheep that are ill may instead follow the voice of a stranger. Sheep wander off and fall into ravines. There

are many voices out there vying for our attention. Many distractions lure us from the path. Jesus promises that he will never let us go. His voice will bring us back. We belong to him. This is a strong word of reassurance to us in our struggles to be faithful. In our choices each day as we practice our faith by saying yes to some voices and saying no to others, Jesus is there, going before us and leading us.

This passage from John is often referred to as the Good Shepherd passage. Jesus is speaking to a group of Pharisees. When we think of Pharisees, we generally have a negative opinion of who they were. But actually, they were a group of people who tried to do the right thing. These were people who today would be your daily Bible reading Protestants or your daily communicant Catholics. They lived by the rules, and they were faithful to their tradition. They, of course, interpreted life through legalistic eyes. John tells us that they didn't understand Jesus' words: "The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd," Jesus says. "The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd." This idea is repeated several times throughout the passage.

Let's think about that for a minute. Communication requires a speaker and a listener. One can either be a casual listener (which is not really listening), or an active listener. In order to have true communication, one must be an active listener. It takes active listening to establish relationship. The sheep listen for the voice of their shepherd. There is relationship there between the shepherd and the sheep that shepherd tends.

I love John's gospel. Of the four gospel writers, John was trying to communicate something much larger than legalism or chronology or historical facts. His gospel is expansive, visionary, even mystical.

What do I mean by "mystical?" Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as, "The reality behind the veil of life." My definition is a tad more basic: "Mysticism is a spiritual interpretation of life informed by one's experience of the eternal." It seems as I get older, my faith is much less about what I BELIEVE and much more about my lived experience. I'm trying to get out of my head and into my heart. That's not easy for most of us - in many ways, we're the modern-day Pharisees. But I think this passage in John is a good example of that. The Pharisees are in their heads and in their rule book. Jesus is speaking from his heart and he's talking about relationship. No wonder the Pharisees don't understand him!

This passage is not about anxiously worrying if I've been called into the fold or if I'm hearing the right voice. It's about becoming aware of the eternal Voice which is always present to every living creature. To hear it we must *LISTEN WITH AN ATTUNED HEART*, which are the first words of St. Benedict's Rule. It is a Voice calling us into relationship, into communion with the Creator, with our fellow human beings, with all of creation. It's becoming like the sheep in the passage who listen for the voice of their master.

The distinction I'm trying to make here is this: Jesus is talking to a group of people that believes one drives oneself into God's arms by following rules, by living good lives, by being blameless before others, by trying to be "perfect." Of course, none of them (or us) are. But that's beside the point. Jesus is telling them they won't find God by being driven; they will find God when they allow themselves to be DRAWN by God's voice.

I don't believe one is DRIVEN into the fold by a litmus test of belief. Rather, one is DRAWN into the fold by simply listening for the heartbeat of the eternal. And this image of the heart, opening - when we open our hearts - and we know this isn't always easy - as we heard in Jan Richardson's blessing as we gathered this morning - *Rest [your hand] over that place in your chest that has grown closed and tight, where the rust, with its talent for making decay look artful, has bitten into what you once held dear. She urges us to press [the] knot and feel how it gives way, turning upon the hinge of your heart.* This opens us to the mystery.

And how are we drawn into the Mystery? One way is through nature. St. Antony, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure and other giants of Christian theology describe how there are two Bibles. The first Bible was born about 17 billion years ago. It is creation itself, which unfortunately we largely ignore or mistreat today. The other Bible is the one you and I are familiar with.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit and modern mystic, was a great observer of the natural world, the first Bible. He saw God's love manifest in every living creature and plant, even in minerals. His was a Franciscan spirituality, observing that all of life responds to the Master's voice or call in its purest form. It is the soul's longing to be connected to the whole - to the plants and flowers and birds and other creatures, to other humans, to the weather and all of the natural elements that surround us.

When we are able to connect ourselves to the whole of creation, then we know that we belong in the universe and that we are God's children. We are a part of the flow of life which is visited upon us daily in the form of the Holy Spirit. We are not isolated, wretched beings, just trying to be saved for some heaven later. It is our very choosing to be isolated, anxious, and fearful that has caused us to create our own hell on earth. Yet, as Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is within us; it is at hand. It is here and it is now, if we would only listen for it. We are part of creation, and we are loved by the divine and called by name.

Jesus recognizes, of course, the import of knowing another's name. Throughout the scriptures as well as in mythology and folklore, we see how knowing someone's name often means having a kind of power; one's name holds something of a key to one's nature. Yet with Christ, this knowing is always steeped in grace, not control. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out," Jesus says in this passage where he describes himself as the good shepherd. The gate of Christ swings toward freedom, not captivity. The shepherd does not assume a role of domination, of power-over that constrains and confines; he is one who pours his power out on our behalf, that we may enter into the places where we can flourish. "...that they may have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus says.

With such imagery before us, I invite us to take a few minutes for contemplation to consider these reflection questions. Listen for the one that speaks most directly to you right now:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- As we travel through these days of resurrection, how will you open yourself to the Christ who desires to know you and to be known by you?
- How well do you want to be known?
- Are there any corners of your heart that you resist being known?
- Might those very spaces become a place of prayer, a doorway, a gate that opens into freedom?