

Voice Recognition

This sermon is a bit of role reversal. We take affirmation of faith very seriously at St. John's, and so all confirmation students, especially in 9th grade, are given a series of assignments designed to help them grow in their faith journey.

This spring the tables were turned on me. This confirmation class handed *me* an assignment--a preaching assignment.

Here's how it happened. One important assignment for 9th graders comes out of Matthew 16. Jesus asks the disciples "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" After they give him the range of opinions out there in the community, Jesus then asks, "Who do **you** say that I am?"

It is the essential question of Christianity. You cannot profess to be a Christian if you don't know Jesus. So who is he?

We ask our confirmands to spend some time coming up with a thoughtful answer to that. Who do you say Jesus is that makes him worth following?

At the same time, these students were asked to come up with at least three questions about God, Jesus, faith, Christianity, the Bible, or the church. Questions that they really would like answers to. The more difficult, more baffling, the better. Then we spent our last class time exploring those questions.

Two of this year's students redirected assignment #1 right back at me. One of their questions was: "Who do *you* say Jesus is?"

It's the only question I've been asked by confirmation students that I would not deal with. Not right away. When Jesus asked this question of his disciples, he made a distinction between what *others* say and what each of *them* had to say. He did not want to hear conventional wisdom or the safe or obedient answer. He wanted to know: what do you truly think?

In confirmation we ask the question in the same way. We don't want to hear you say what you think we want you to say. We want to know who YOU say Jesus is.

So I didn't want to give my answer yet, because there was a good chance someone might think the pastor's answer is the one they are supposed to give, and then Jesus wouldn't get an honest answer to his question.

Now, you confirmands have all completed that assignment. You have thought about and declared who you say Jesus is. It's only fair that I now complete my assignment and answer the question: who do I say Jesus is?

At this point in life, I am no longer surprised when the assigned Gospel reading for Confirmation Sunday guides me to say exactly what I need to say. It so happens that when we explored the question of who is Jesus in confirmation, we started out right here in John, with the "I Am" Statements.

This is where Jesus speaks in metaphors to try to explain who he is:

I am the Bread of Life.

I am the Gate.

I am the Good Shepherd.

I am the Light of the World.

I am the True Vine.

Figures of speech are complicated. They don't all work for everybody. As we read in verse six of our Gospel, people in Jesus' time struggled with his figures of speech. Then when Jesus mixed his metaphors, calling himself both the Gate and the Good Shepherd at almost the same time, most of them went down for the count.

I suspect Jesus tossed out so many I AM statements in hopes that everyone would find among them at least one that would give profound insight into who he was. Those in our confirmation class generally find at least one of these that worked well for them.

I have actually had to adjust my thinking about which statement most accurately describes Jesus to me. There was a time when the Good Shepherd image did nothing for me. I know it works for others—it may be special to you, and I respect that.

But the question I was asked is not what do others say about Jesus; it is who do I say Jesus is.

And I know next to nothing about sheep, other than that they have reputation for being stupid. I have no personal experience of whether this reputation is deserved or

not. But I do know that no one ever compliments a person by praising their keen, sheep-like intellect.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then, that makes me a sheep—an animal with a reputation for being stupid, and I don't like being called stupid. It makes no sense to me that people created in God's image would be pathetically stupid, mindless followers.

I cringe whenever I hear a congregation referred to as a pastor's flock, or the process of recruiting members from another church as "sheep-stealing."

I have such a hard time connecting with the idea of Jesus as a highly competent herder of utterly clueless creatures, that it's probably a good thing I was not called as a pastor to a place such as The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd on Eau Claire's west side.

But here's the thing with metaphors. When a metaphor compares two things, it does not say they are alike in every way. What would be the point of saying "the river was as wet as water?" A good metaphor reveals the truth by highlighting one thing that two dissimilar things have in common.

It has occurred to me recently that when Jesus compared himself to a shepherd and us to sheep, he was not saying his mission is to exercise complete control over the lives of creatures too dumb to fend for themselves.

Rather there is a something very specific about the relationship between shepherd and sheep that applies to our relationship with Jesus. And a clue to that can be found in the verses that come just before this passage.

Chapter nine of the Gospel of John tells a lengthy story of Jesus encountering a blind man who learns to recognize Jesus just by hearing his voice. That stands in contrast to the holier-than-thou Pharisees who, despite having excellent vision, cannot recognize Jesus.

Jesus reflects on this experience by bringing up this curious relationship between shepherd and sheep. "The shepherd goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him *because they know his voice,*" he says.

Put that together and it becomes clear that what Jesus is really talking about in his metaphor of the Good Shepherd here is voice recognition. That happens to be something sheep are really, really good at.

In fact, recent scientific research has confirmed that sheep are remarkably adept at recognizing those with whom they come in contact.

Even in large flocks, they are able to accurately distinguish between the other individual sheep. They are able to tell when a sheep who has been among them is missing. I found it especially fascinating that they instantly recognize and avoid bully sheep. Shows what I know, I thought bully sheep was an oxymoron, but apparently they exist.

In the past four decades, scientists have done a great deal of research into voice recognition technology because of its potential as a security tool. They have had very little difficulty isolating the factors that distinguish one voice from another.

The thing that has made voice recognition technology difficult to perfect is the issue of ambient noise. Unless all samples are taken in an environment of absolute silence, it is very difficult to accomplish voice recognition. It can be done, but it takes a lot of work.

In the same way, I suspect hearing Jesus' voice would be relatively easy in an environment where there is no ambient noise. But even if you are a cloistered monk, that is not the environment in which we live.

We are surrounded by ambient noise. We are surrounded by temptations, material desires, our egos. By the urge to keep up with the Joneses, the craving for success or approval whatever the costs, by voices in our heads that say, just worry about me, and let others look out for themselves.

By a willingness to sacrifice the future for present and to focus on making ourselves feel good right now. That's a lot of ambient noise and often it gets so loud it's a wonder if we can hear God's voice at all.

For all their other faults and failings, sheep are pretty good at filtering out ambient noise to recognize voices. For them it is the key to a peaceful and abundant life, insofar as a sheep's life can be categorized as abundant.

In this image of the Good Shepherd, Jesus is offering us abundant, full life. The key to that abundant, full life is recognizing Jesus's voice.

The question then becomes, given all the ambient noise of our lives, how do we recognize that voice? I don't know what a shepherd's voice is supposed to sound like. I have no confidence that I would recognize it among all the ambient noise. How am I going to be able to follow Jesus if I cannot recognize his voice?

Here is where the shepherd image needs a bit of a tweak for me:

In an article about the recognition capabilities of sheep, I found this intriguing sentence: *"Sheep are especially adept at recognizing the presence or absence of their caregiver."*

That's when it clicked for me. Two thousand years ago in Palestine, that sentence would have read, "Sheep are especially adept at recognizing the presence or absence of their shepherd."

That was fitting for that place and time, but in my urban, 21st-century world the image that makes the most sense is "caregiver." That is a voice I can recognize. I have seen good care givers in action. I have been a caregiver.

Unlike a shepherd, a good caregiver does not control or micromanage lives. A caregiver does not take responsibility for every action that happens to his or her charges, every moment of every day. The caregiver is there to help.

A good caregiver can be demanding for the person's good, but unlike a sheep, the person being cared for ultimately decides whether or not to go along with the program. That person, not the caregiver, makes the decisions that lead to abundant life or to death.

But the biggest difference is this: shepherds may be fond of their sheep but they do not share a deep relationship of love with them. The greatest gift of good caregivers is the love they share.

Sometimes people need a lot of care; sometimes they don't need much at all, nothing more than an occasional checkup. Whatever level of care we need is what the caregiver provides.

Caretakers do their best work when most needed, in times of profound pain or sadness, or need, because that's what love does. It's no fun sitting up all night with a sick child, or cleaning up after an aged person who no longer has control over bodily functions. But there are few acts in this world as pure and honorable as those, because they are done out of genuine love.

So that's who I say Jesus is. Jesus is the Good Caregiver. That is a voice I would recognize anywhere.

I have always been reluctant to give unsolicited advice, but I think I've lived long enough and seen enough now that I can give this one piece of advice. And actually, it isn't my advice at all. It is Jesus' advice, laid right out there in John 10: in all that you do, listen for the voice of the Good Caregiver.

When you have to make important decisions in life, listen for the voice of the Good Caregiver.

When you are trying to figure out your purpose in life. . .

When you are confronted by challenges that scare you half to death. . .

When you are trying to decide what place the church has in your life . . .

When you participate in community affairs, public policy, elections, and service activities . . .

When you face temptations. . .

When you are confused and unsure of yourself. . .

When you are lost and cannot find your way. . .

When you feel yourself falling into the deep pit of despair. . .

In all these situations, listen for the voice of the Good Caregiver.

Who do I say Jesus is? Jesus is my Caregiver; I shall not want. It's not catchy or flashy but that is how I know Jesus.

I pray that in whatever you do, you listen for the voice of the Good Caregiver, the one who wants you to have the fullest, most satisfying, and most honorable life possible, and can show you how to get there.