

When I was in high school my brother and I owned about twenty sheep – nineteen ewes and a buck. We fed them, treated them for various problems, arranged to have their wool sheared, helped the new born lambs and sold the lambs for what we hoped would be profit. But most of the year we did nothing at all. The sheep drank water from the creek, and fed on the green grass in the pasture. There were no wolves or eagles to threaten them. The fence kept them where they belonged. So I never really got to know my sheep, nor they me. If I had called them they would not have come – my voice meant nothing to them. If one of them was missing I never would have known it unless I counted – even then I would only have known ^{that one was} ~~how many were~~ missing – not which one.

How different was the situation in Jesus day. Sheep were only gathered inside the sheepfold at night – during the day they fed in pastures that had no fences – no barriers to segregate one flock from another. How essential that the sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherd! Only when they responded to his voice would they be gathered around the one who was their protector, their ^{provider} ~~safety~~.

In the gospel reading this morning, our Lord uses the image of a shepherd and sheep. He says, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me."

My sheep hear my voice.

There are no fences in the pastures in which you and I graze. No fence to keep us in Jesus' flock. All the flocks of the world graze in the very same pastures where we feed. Go online – every religion, every activity, every spirituality, every ideology, every temptation, every flock in all the world grazes there. There are no fences.

Get into a car – it will take you to holy places and hellish places – in your journey you can find drugs legal and illegal – travel far enough and you can sleep in lands where there is war and in lands where there is peace.

Turn on your radio – Gospel and rap may be side by side on the dial. Go to the bookstore or the library – most every thought that can be thought can be encountered there. A million voices out there are calling your name.

Whose voice will you hear?

Jesus said, My sheep hear my voice.

How do you come to know one voice from another? How does a child learn to know the voice of the one who feeds her? Protects her? Loves her? ^{Repetition?} ~~Maybe it is just repetition.~~ Along with the feeding and protecting and loving. Over time that voice means nourishment, safety, affection. She just knows.

And Jesus' voice? How do you know when it is really his voice and not the voice of some other that would be your shepherd? Christians say that the scriptures help us to know. By coming to know Jesus' voice in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Jesus' voice in the letters of Paul, by hearing God's voice in Isaiah and the Psalms and Jeremiah and Genesis you gain the ability to discern Jesus' voice in every pasture of this world. ~~And as you hear Jesus voice in all of the scriptures you learn that his voice is clearest in his suffering and dying on the cross.~~ ^{Jesus'} As he lays down his life for his friends, for you and for me, his voice of love is so very clear.

His voice is echoed in the sisters and brothers he calls members of his body. In the love and nurture and support of other Christians in the church, you hear Jesus' own voice, learn Jesus' voice the way an infant learns his mother's voice. There is simply no substitute for being involved in the life of the church. As we experience his love and forgiveness in one another Jesus' voice becomes the one we know best.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them.

Jesus knows you. The world knows you by your appearance – by your being thin or short or stout or tall or middle-aged or being a teenager. The world knows you by what you have – your possessions and clothes and home and car. The world knows you by what you do – your work, the grades you get in school, the instrument you play, the food you prepare. Jesus knows you. Jesus is not fooled by any of those other things. Jesus knows you. The Psalmist says, "Before a word is on my tongue, O Lord you know it completely." Jesus knows you like that – even better than you know yourself.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.

Maybe you have seen a two year old testing his mothers patience at the mall. She calls his name – It is obvious that he hears but he keeps right on going. He hears but he does not follow.

It is easy to be like that two year old. I hear Jesus' voice in my heart but I ignore it – thinking I will find a better way for myself. Sometimes loving looks to costly – demanding too much time, too much patience, too much helping. Sometimes anxiety takes over instead of faith and I rush here and there and everywhere rather than following where my Lord leads.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. My sheep follow me. Following Jesus always leads to the cross – to offering ourselves as he has offered himself. Love one another as I have loved you, he says. As we do we have this promise: I give my sheep eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

To say it simply – you will be safe with Jesus. No matter what – you will be safe with Jesus. In hearing his voice, in being known through and through by him, in following wherever he leads you will be safe in him. Already, now and forever.

On the day Jesus spoke these words some were deciding about Jesus. “Tell us plainly if you are the Messiah.” But Jesus spoke about his sheep. “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.” They wanted to know about a title for Jesus but Jesus calls his own into a relationship – hearing – following. Every day hearing – following. This is the life Jesus wants for you for he knows you – knows what you need most of all – that you would hear his voice and follow.