

EASTER FOUR, YEAR C, MAY 8, 2022

I have a feeling that many of you had the same experience that I did growing up. If I heard my mother call me by my entire name I knew I was in deep trouble. There is nothing like hearing your mother's voice yelling your full name to bring you up short and look for the quickest exit you can find.

But we also know a mother's voice can be very soothing especially when you've been hurt. It's interesting how we can distinguish our mother's voice over other voices. I don't doubt that many of us can still hear our mother's voices in our heads telling us we're okay, or that we will persevere.

I can't help but think of all the mothers in Ukraine who have carried their children and did whatever it took to get them to safety telling them everything would be okay. I can't help but think of all the Polish mothers who provided carriages for the Ukrainian mothers who made it into their country. They heard the cry of the mothers and responded in whatever way they could to ease their pain. I also realize that we marvel at all these women who have sacrificed for their children or responded to the voices of those they never met. It's awe inspiring but why is it that we find this so unique? I think there are so many voices coming at us from all directions these days, it is hard to hear the voices that we do need to hear especially the ones who need or offer comforting.

In today's gospel we are told that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and that his sheep know his voice. It is true sheep develop a unique relationship with their shepherd and respond only to their shepherd's voice. Often time shepherds will end up at the same watering hole with their flocks and they all get mixed up together. However, the shepherds do not worry about the mix-up because when it is time to go home, each one issues their own distinctive call and that shepherd's sheep withdraws from the rest to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd's voice, and it is the only one they will follow.

Sheep do require a shepherd but that does not mean that they are dumb. On the contrary they are smart enough to know they can't go it alone; they need someone to lead and to guide them. Don't we all? The sheep feel secure just to hear the voice of the shepherd and the gospel tells us that Jesus wants us to hear his words, he wants us to understand who he is for our lives. He wants us to know and believe that he is our shepherd and we are his sheep. He wants us to follow his voice; and to hear his words of joy, love, comfort, and peace for our lives.

But how do we know Jesus? How do we come to know him, not as some distant figure who lived a long time ago, not just as someone to pray to when we're in trouble, but in a real sense, in a personal way? How do we come to know Jesus' voice?

It's hard enough trying to hear the voices around us. How many of us had our own children or have our grandchildren tune out our voices. How many of you tune another person out because you don't want to hear what they have to say to you. We do it all the time. Sometimes we don't do it deliberately it's just that you and I are too easily distracted by everything else going on around us. Between I-phones, Ipads, TV's, e-mails, texts, we just get caught up with what's whirling all around us. I saw a cartoon that showed a sheep lounging on a recliner with headphones on, a book and a laptop in his lap, TV blaring, radio playing music loudly and in the distance a shepherd hollering. The sheep is saying, "I wonder why I don't hear from the shepherd anymore."

So maybe we aren't deaf to the words of Jesus. Maybe we don't have a hearing problem as much as we hear what we want to hear, and we tune out Jesus or the harder sayings of Jesus and tune in on all the sounds and words of the world. Maybe part of our problem is we only listen to what we want to listen to, and far too much of our listening is centered on what everyone else tells us is good and not on Jesus.

Here's an illustration: Two men were walking along a crowded city sidewalk. Suddenly, one of the men remarked, "Listen to the lovely sound of that cricket," But the other man could not hear the sound. He asked his friend how he could hear the sound of a cricket amid the roar of the traffic and the sound of the people. The first man, who was a zoologist, had trained himself to hear the sounds of nature. He didn't explain to his friend in words how he could hear the sound of the cricket, but instead, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a half-dollar coin, dropped it onto the sidewalk, and watch intently as a dozen people began to look for the coin as they heard it clanking around amid the sounds of the traffic and city life. He turned to his friend and said, "We hear what we listen for."

What are we listening for in our lives? How can we hear the voice of Jesus in our lives and how do we know if it's authentic? It amazes me how the gospel is so often distorted to fit our own voices and beliefs. We live in a world where many Christians believe it's virtuous to hate and excoriate those who differ from you. I sometimes think the early Christians would not even recognize what we call Christianity today. Think about those early Christians and what they did, what they sacrificed, believed in and how they persevered for the sake of listening to the voice of Jesus.

Here's how others saw them. The Romans thought the Christians were lunatics and fanatics that devoted their lives to a dead prophet. Lucian, an early 2nd century Roman writer wrote; "Christians display an absurd generosity and sacrificial concern for other people they don't even know." Sounds like what the Polish women are doing for the Ukrainian mothers. The Roman governor Pliny called them perverse and extravagant because of their generosity. But they didn't care because their lives had been set on fire by the life giving joy, passion and purpose they heard in listening to the voice of Jesus and they wanted everyone to know and experience this passion. How have we gotten away from what those early Christians expressed in listening to the voice of the shepherd. In the words of Dean Hollerith of Washington Cathedral, "How did we come to boil down, sanitize and sterilize Christianity and worse, make it reasonable?" We've tamed it to meet our voices. What's happened to our passion, our joy, our generosity of spirit that is found in following Jesus' voice? How do we rekindle it?

There's a church in San Francisco, St. Anthony's Roman Catholic church that for 70years has served meals to the needy. A young man released from jail went there to get a meal. He saw a volunteer woman cleaning the table next to him and he asked, "When do we get down on our knees and do chores?" "You don't", she said. "When do we get preached to?" " No sermon", she said. "So, when do I hear the lecture how I should change my life around?" " Not here", she replied. He grew suspicious. "So what's the gimmick, the catch?" She pointed to the inscription over the door that said "Caritati Dei. "What does that mean?, he asked. It simply means, out of love for God.

Out of love for God. You see listening to the voice of Jesus brings about a generosity where we just give to give, love to love with no strings attached all for the sake of out of love for God. This is the crazy nature of our faith. Our faith should be anything but tame if we're listening to the voice of the Shepherd. This same powerful Shepherds

voice made Martin Luther King foolish enough to have a dream and die for it. Mother Theresa listened to the voice that made her believe that her work in slums could make a difference. The shepherds voice made Desmond Tutu believe that a black South African could change the most repressive government of all time.

What can we do out of love for God? Where is our passion our joy, our purpose? Are we making a difference in a world that says it's spiritual but has difficulty responding or recognizing the voice of the shepherd? How can we show what it means to follow the voice of Jesus? You know what set the early Christians apart from the rest of the populace was a strong belief to exemplify certain virtues of faith, hope, integrity, respect, love, wisdom, justice, forgiveness, courage and humility. These are the virtues we need to extol and teach because they are the bedrock of our faith. These are the virtues that the Good Shepherds voice calls us to ingest into our very souls. We need glad and generous hearts because when it comes right down to it the only things that matter is goodness, gentleness, generosity and love.

You and I need to be a little bit more like the early Christians who were crazy with joy, love and hope. If we listen to the true voice of the Good Shepherd we would realize that there is nothing easy about following Jesus or being a Christian. We would realize that the response of the Polish mothers is not unique rather it is the norm of what a Christian does. But how we get there all depends on whose voice you want to listen too. Amen.