

Sermon on John 10:22-30
Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

I don't know if I've told you this before, but when I became a first-time father, I was pretty excited about the whole experience about childbirth. I took the parenting classes with my wife, Kim, when she was pregnant, and remember that we missed the last session because that was the day she went into labor. When our daughter Lisa was born, I was there in the delivery room (thankfully, without a video camera), but I was awestruck with the experience. Then, when Lisa was born, I wanted to get to know our new daughter as soon as I could, and spent as much time in the hospital room as Kim and the nurses would allow. When I did go to work the next day, to Zion Lutheran Church in Anoka where I was a pastor in my first call, I prepared a sermon on my "mountaintop experience" as a new father with a newborn daughter – it was "Transfiguration Sunday" that first Sunday when I preached. (How appropriate!)

But the very next afternoon following Lisa's birth (she had been born in the middle of the night, I recall), I went straight to Mercy Hospital to do hospital calls, and my first visit (of course) was to the maternity ward. I was very clear on my self interest. And as I walked quickly down the hall of the maternity ward, past the nursery filled with newborns, I heard a baby's cry that I recognized immediately. I knew it was Lisa's voice, which I could distinguish already from the other babies in their rooms, just 18 hours after she had been born. Sure enough, when I entered Kim's room, there was Lisa, crying as she was being changed – this had been the voice I had heard. I was kind of amazed at the thought that I had so soon become acquainted with the sound of her voice, having only heard her cry a few times before. Now, I have no idea how long it took for Lisa to learn to recognize MY voice. Maybe it only took a few days, maybe it took a week or two. Maybe child development experts can tell me how long it is before a child recognizes a father or mother's voice. But whenever I read the gospel lesson and hear the words, "*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me,*" I think of this experience of recognizing my daughter's voice some 22 years ago. Now she is soon to graduate from college, and when she calls on the phone, I know her voice immediately. So there is power and recognition in hearing a voice that we know. Especially in hearing the voice of one we love, and trust.

We hear a lot of voices and sounds every day, don't we? Which voices do we listen to? Do we listen because they are loud and demanding? Because we find them interesting, or pleasant to listen to? Or do we listen because we trust their voice, because we know them, and know that they care about us?

Who among you remember the name “Walter Cronkite?” Boy, that shows our age, doesn’t it?! Walter Cronkite was the “anchor” for the CBS Evening News throughout the 1960s and 70s, and became known as “the most trusted voice in America.” Most of us didn’t know him, personally. But we recognized him as the one who brought us the most important news of the day. He told us about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; he told us about the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy in 1968. He reported to us from the battlefields of Vietnam, and reported to us the Presidential election returns from Kennedy to LBJ, to Nixon, Ford, Jimmie Carter and Ronald Reagan. His voice became one we trusted because he brought us information that we trusted was true and accurate, and he did so with sincerity as well as compassion. But we didn’t know Walter Cronkite, really, and we didn’t follow him.

There are many other voices that speak to us over the public airwaves, whom some trust and others don’t. We hear from Rush Limbaugh, Keith Obberman, Bill O’Reilly, and Rachel Maddows. We hear the voices of public leaders like Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill or Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Mostly we trust those political or media voices when their perspective is similar to ours, and share our ideological point of view. We don’t give our trust to just anybody. Most have to earn our trust, or speak in ways we can affirm.

It’s somewhat different with people we know, who are closer to us. When we can both hear their voice, and measure their actions. A principal or school teacher may earn our trust if they give us reliable information, we can trust their judgment, and we know that they care about us. We learn to trust our relatives and our parents’ friends when they both speak to us with compassion and are reliable. In the same way, we learn not to trust relatives and friends who speak hatefully about others, whose prejudices are clear, and who may speak to us or treat us with abuse. We learn to steer clear if we are able. Regrettably, many children and young people who don’t know how to judge the trustworthiness of people close to them can become their victims, unless somebody intervenes. In a perfect world we learn to trust our parents’ voices and follow them where they lead us, and often this is so. But too often a parent, teacher, or spiritual leader can become an unreliable voice that cannot be trusted. We know this from the many reported instances of parental, teacher, or clergy abuse – emotional, verbal, physical or sexual abuse – that we hear about in the news almost daily. That is why it is so essential that a whole extended family, a whole community, and a whole congregation and Church be the vigilant eyes and ears that watch out for children and the vulnerable, so that no one is harmed, and that parents, teachers, and church leaders remain trustworthy voices for children and the flock to follow.

So in all the many competing voices demanding our attention, and the cacophony of sound in today’s world, how can you and I hear, and then recognize,

the voice of God? How will we know the voice of Jesus when he calls you and me? You and I have never heard the actual, physical voice of God, so how can we recognize it? When it's not the timbre or quality of the voice, what is it that tells us "this is the voice of God" speaking to us (when so many seem to claim to speak for God and use God's authority)? It's a critical question, as so many speak with the authority of God and the Church, but do not prove trustworthy, and call us to do what goes against what the God of Holy Scriptures teaches and commands. Witness the Jim Joneses of this world, the Osama Bin Ladens, and the abusive priests and pastors who have preached in the name of God but done unspeakable things in God's name. Contrast them with the voice of Jesus who said, "*My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me.*" The one who washed his disciples' feet, healed the sick, forgave sinners their sins, fed the hungry, sat with children, ate with tax collectors and sinners, and told his followers to love one another, and love your neighbor as you love yourself, for this is how you show your love for God. That's the voice of Jesus we have grown to know and love.

So it's not necessarily the "sound" of the voice that brings recognition and trust when we listen for the voice of God. For none of us have heard God's voice like we have heard the voice of parents, siblings, friends, or teachers. The "sound" of God's voice must be in the *content* of the words, and their consistency with the words of love that we have heard so clearly from Jesus in the gospels. We know Jesus' voice in scripture because he speaks about God's love and compassion for you and me, about love for neighbor and even a challenge to love our enemies and to pray for them, so that we can one day overcome the hatred and fear of them that leads to violence and war. We trust Jesus' words because his actions are loving.

The other question of the day: how can we know that Jesus' voice is that of God's Son? It's ironic that in the gospel today, Jesus' adversaries chose the festival of the Dedication to challenge Jesus in the Temple about his identity as the Messiah. The Feast of the Dedication was what we know today as "Hanukah", the Feast of Lights, the commemoration of Jewish faithful who had opposed Herod Antiochus's desecration of the Temple with pagan idols. Their question to Jesus was, "Who are you?" Are you the Messiah, the one for whom we have waited? If so, tell us plainly! We want to know if you are the one, and if we can trust you.

Jesus didn't answer them directly, but said, "I have told you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." So one could not know for sure who Jesus was, friend, teacher or Messiah, without being in relationship with him. The key to understanding, to Jesus, was relationship. Those who questioned or opposed him at the time were not in relationship, so how could they know or understand?

So this is the paradox we face. Do you want to know who Jesus is? Then listen for his voice, and open your heart to relationship with him. Do you want to know who “speaks for Jesus”? Then listen for consistency of their message with that of Jesus in the gospels: with love for neighbor, compassion for those who suffer, forgiveness of sins and mercy for all those who suffer. Do you want to know who you can trust in the Church? Listen for that voice, which speaks with love, and look for the actions which are loving, respectful, and honorable in Jesus’ name. And if you want to hear the voice of God, seek a quiet place and do it in prayer, when you can both speak to God and listen for God’s voice. And don’t be disappointed if you don’t hear God’s voice in sound; it may take a long time to hear God’s voice, and it may come through the words or actions of another human being, who serves as God’s messenger to you.

So whether it is in worship in God’s sanctuary, in a conversation at home or at work with another trusted friend, out in the quietness of nature, or in the busyness and noise of the world around us, I ask you to listen for the voice of God through the words of God’s Son, which may come through scripture or in a neighbor’s loving words or thoughtful deeds. Test the words with the criteria of love. And when you do hear the voice of God in a way that you can trust, I encourage you not to be afraid to follow, and even take a risk in seeking to do God’s will. For it is in listening for God’s voice and having the courage to follow Jesus’ call that you and I experience the kingdom of God. And then we can invite others to listen, hear, and follow God’s voice along with us, and so God will change the world and transform all of our lives, through faith in the one who loves us to death, who gave his life for us, and raises us all up to eternal life. Thanks be to God! Amen.