

Sermon on John 10:1-10  
Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....

On this Good Shepherd Sunday we hear Jesus' voice in the gospel say: "*The sheep hear the voice [of the shepherd]. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.*" (John 10:3b-5)

Do you know if this is true? About sheep, I mean. There are a lot of people (city folk, mostly) who want to know, who have tested this out in experiments with sheep. I watched some YouTube videos this weekend in preparation for this sermon (yes, I read the Bible passages also!). There were several interesting things I learned, by searching YouTube to answer the question "will sheep follow a stranger, or only their shepherd?"

I saw one video out in some pasture, where a shepherd taught school children the words he used to call his sheep. They each tried calling out to them: "TikiTik!" Nothing. Once again, "Tiki tik!" The sheep didn't move, they didn't listen, they just kept on grazing in that luscious green pasture. Several different students tried it. Nothing. Some of the sheep even ran away from the students calling out to them, because they were strangers. They didn't know their voices. Then the shepherd stepped forward, and in a loud voice, called out to the sheep. "TikiTik!" They looked up, and one by one, they started trotting over to him. Within minutes the whole flock surrounded the shepherd, who fed them treats from his bag of grain. *The sheep heard his voice, they knew him, and they followed.*

There was another video on YouTube which showed a shepherd standing at the edge of a field, looking into a dense fog. You couldn't see anything but the fog. The shepherd called out into the fog. Nothing but quiet. He called out again, listened and waited. He looked back at the camera, sheepishly, with a sly grin on his face. (Sorry about that, I couldn't resist the pun!) Then he called out one more time. A few seconds later, you can hear the bleating of one sheep, then two, then several more bleating sheep. Then all of a sudden, you saw about a dozen sheep running out of the fog, down the hill, toward the shepherd. Soon there were hundreds of sheep, all running toward the shepherd, answering the call from a voice they knew so well. It was beautiful.

So Jesus spoke in this "figure of speech" when we taught his disciples, but they still didn't understand him. But this passage from John's gospel is very

familiar to us. We now associate Jesus with the “Good Shepherd” who knows us, his flock of sheep, so very well – and how we, through faith, will follow him because we know his voice, and trust him. He gave his life for the sheep – for all of us. Now we even use the term “shepherd” for the work pastors do in our churches (the word *pastore* in Spanish being the word for shepherd). So we assume that the church “flock” will follow the pastor like a shepherd.

So, I tried this little experiment yesterday, before the Memorial Service for Lynn Schibonski began. There were a lot of people gathering in the pews for the service – more than 100, maybe 125 or 150 even – but there was only one problem. Everyone was scattered all over the nave – most about halfway back, or way in the back – nobody sat anywhere near the front. Even Lynn’s brother Lyle, and his friend, sat in the second pew – at least 50 feet from the pulpit. I could hardly see the people in the back – their faces were hidden to me like sheep out in the fog!

So I decided to call people out, to come forward and sit further toward the front of the pews. They didn’t move. They didn’t know my voice. I was a stranger. I called out again; I even said the service couldn’t start till more people moved up to the front. Not one person budged. Too many Lutherans. I approached some of the Redeemer members who were here, got right up in their faces, and when I called them by name, some of them actually moved to a front pew, over by the piano. Still too far away. I asked some of you as you came up from the elevator – you wouldn’t come up, either. “Why would we do that?” Then I got brother Lyle and his pastor friend to move up to the front chairs – finally, and they are both pastors, wearing clerical collars! Then, when they moved, one woman sitting behind them asked, “Oh, is that section for family and friends?” YES, I said! (I was ready to try anything. Even lie!) “OK, we’ll move up behind them.” So a whole row of friends and relatives finally moved up to the front chair section. And I called for all the new people coming down the aisle to take their places up front. It actually worked well enough so that I called for the worship to begin. Now you know why we have processions with the family to begin funeral services – so that the family will follow the cross and we can lead them to their places in the front of the church, where most Lutherans fear to sit!

So here’s the deal. I have spoken to you using this figure of speech, of how people won’t listen to a strange pastor’s voice, or such a strange request as to sit up front in church, like a parable for the barrier that exists for the church and its leaders out in the world. We pastors may try all kinds of ways to get the word out to people outside of the church’s walls – we try signs on the outside lawn, we try walking and knocking on doors, newspaper ads and radio or tv spots, we even try social media posts and facebook events – but it is so hard to get anyone to listen to us. Why? Maybe because people don’t know our voices, and because of all the terrible things people hear about the behavior or judgmental words of some clergy,

hardly anyone listens or pays attention. I'm not crying about it, I'm just stating a fact! So people in churches want pastors to be "like shepherds", and get out there and get people to follow, and come into the sheepfold – the church – just like sheep, and become faithful members. But they don't. Because we are not Jesus. If we try to compare ourselves to Jesus we will soon end up with an inferiority complex! So we pastors learn to become content with small flocks of people inside our churches, with lots of empty space, and you are conditioned to also expect this. We blame those stupid sheep outside who aren't listening, or won't listen to our voices of welcome. And too often we in churches forget to go outside to get to know the people out there, so that they can learn to trust us, and too few pastors go out to seek the lost, or help protect vulnerable people from the wolves and the thieves and bandits out there.

For there are wolves, thieves and bandits out there, that is for sure. There are predators of all kinds, who prey on vulnerable children, on women and men, elderly seniors, and immigrants. People who want their money, their possessions, or their bodies. Some just want their votes, or are looking for power and influence, and need "followers" in order to get it. Some of these predators come disguised as trustworthy, supposedly responsible people, like teachers, pastors, or political leaders. When such persons take advantage of people, or harm them, they make it difficult for many people to trust teachers, pastors, or political leaders who ARE responsible and trustworthy. Because people can't tell the difference anymore, unless they really get to know their voice, and learn to trust them by their actions.

So people of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a lot of work to do to regain trust for the Church among the many people out there who have been wounded, driven away, or who have learned that the safest thing of all is simply not to listen. Some people who wear clerical collars, work in schools, or serve in public office have done a lot of harm in this country, when they have misused their positions of trust to take advantage of, steal, abuse or harm those who trusted them. Some have been driven away forever by the Church. And when churches ignore the harm that has been done "in Jesus' name", or try to let it "pass by" because it's just "some rotten apples" who do this, we deserve to lose trust or to be ignored.

Brothers and sisters, we need to come together to restore trust in our nation and in our communities by speaking up to oppose the hateful things that have been said about immigrants, about women, about gay, lesbian or transgender people, about Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native-Americans and low-income white people, or people with mental illness or physical barriers, to correct the wrongs which have been done in the name of Christ. People who claim to be "Christians", politicians and clergy, have said and done a lot to terrorize or discriminate against people who may be vulnerable, or lack the political or economic power to oppose them. All of us who are Christians can be lumped together in that same category of mean,

judgmental, hypocritical leaders that people see and hear in the media, whether we like it or not. When I wear my clerical collar out in public, I have to prove that I am not a threat, or a judgmental “Christian” that they hear about on the news. And the only way that we can change that perception is for more of us to publicly proclaim a different message: one of forgiveness and mercy, compassion and welcome, along with the courage to stand up to those who abuse their power and the faith. People also have to learn to recognize the voices of those who are trustworthy, and have the power to defend themselves, against those who claim to be somebody they are not. Not to be sheep who simply follow any voice.

Brothers and sisters, this is the most important reason that I have stepped forward, in public, to speak up at the State Capitol, or at a press conference, or on the street in public actions – against racism or prejudice, against violence or abusive power, or against legislation that harms people in our communities by taking away health care and other necessities of life, that all people need. It’s a burden to get all dressed up, get up to the State Capitol, and prepare a message of peaceful proclamation instead of hate. I’m actually an introvert, and I have to make myself do these things – but I keep practicing, in order to do better.

But thankfully, it’s not just about me – it’s about all of us! Jesus calls us – the Church – his followers – to go out into the world with his message of welcome, and God’s love for every human being. We all have to work together as people of God, across congregations, with Jews and Muslims, and across boundaries we have created between race, ethnicity, or language, to share our common humanity and compassion for every child of God. We need to learn to listen to one another, not just within our own congregations or other Lutherans, but to people who are not like us. It will take time – perhaps a lifetime of effort – but that is what it will take to rebuild trust, so that people will actually listen and hear the voice of God, in Christ Jesus, our Shepherd. For people cannot hear Jesus’ voice if so many self-proclaimed Christians are disturbing the peace with words of condemnation. Our task in the Church is to step up, to proclaim the message of mercy, of hope, of transformation and reconciliation that so many people need to hear today. We are called to love God, love our neighbor, and love one another as Christ has loved us, and to act on that love with acts of kindness for our neighbor, our enemies as well as our friends. That’s not “bad news”, that’s the “good news”!

When we do this outside our doors, perhaps people will begin to listen to the true voice of God, who speaks through those whom God has sent: not only Jesus or angels or the biblical prophets, but every faithful child of God who speaks a word of kindness, mercy, and love for one another. So we pray that every human being will one day hear that voice, and follow the one who calls us all to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. The one who said he *came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*. Thanks be to God. Amen.