

Voice recognition

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 17, 2016.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. John10: 27

The setting of today's gospel narrative is in winter and it is cold. Jesus is walking in the portico of Solomon's temple. It was not uncommon for people to walk among the lofty pillars of the temple to pray and meditate. It is the celebration of the Feast of Dedication we know as Hanukkah and the temple is crowded and noisy.

Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the temple after its defilement by the Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes in the year 164 B.C. The Emperor tried to Hellenize the Jews by sacrificing an offering to Zeus on the altar of God. Hanukkah is also known as the Feast of Lights in which people exchange gifts in brightly lit streets. It is the custom in Jewish homes today to light the seven-branch candlestick to commemorate the restoration of the light of freedom for the Jewish people.

On this occasion, the people are impatient to know if Jesus is really the Messiah. If he would only say so, they would be willing to follow him. Jesus has no need to make any claim for himself. If they want to follow him they will arrive at that conviction on their own. They only need to see for themselves the convincing evidence found in his life and teaching.

Jesus' care and compassion is like that of the Palestinian shepherd, only greater. You can go to the Holy Land today and still see weathered, leathery-faced shepherds leading their flocks over the rocky pastures. Shepherds call each of their sheep by name and they know his voice and respond only to him. A shepherd's life is not easy. They live outdoors day and night and are never off duty. False shepherds are more concerned for their own safety while good shepherds put the safety of their flock before their own.

You may wonder why we are compared to sheep. After all, sheep are rather dumb animals and we like to think of ourselves as reasonable, intelligent and able to use our common sense. We like to think that we are not easily led astray. The reality is that we can be a nation of sheep, apathetic about important issues and all too willing to go along with the crowd. In this year of national and local elections, it is crucial that we are well informed, listening to the voices of reason.

Jesus uses the imagery of us as sheep because we are vulnerable and easily given to irrational fear and doubt rendering us feeling helpless. As sheep are vulnerable when shorn of their protective wool coat, we too are vulnerable when our trappings of wealth and status are taken away. With Jesus as the shepherd of our souls, no power can overcome us, nor will we ever be abandoned or betrayed. When we are faced with difficulty and testing, we can trust that we will be guided in the right direction. The incredibly close relationship of God in Christ is far beyond anything our finite minds can imagine. To know Jesus is to know God. It is all the more important to discern what Jesus calls us to do. In the words of Cecil Alexander's 19th century hymn:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea, day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying, "Christian, follow me."

Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store; from each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian love me more."

We must never allow ourselves to compromise our personal integrity. It may be easier to go along in order to get along, but we must always choose the harder right over the easier wrong. We need healthy nourishment for our mind and inner spirit as much as we need it for our body.

Be aware of those who try to build themselves up by putting you down. They try to make you feel stupid and are skilled at manipulating how you feel about yourself. An emotionally abusive relationship damages your sense of worth. Never let the familiarity of family or friendship allow someone to trample on your feelings. A noxious personal remark under the guise of humor is not funny; it's demeaning. If you feel that you are being belittled, remember that no one can put you down without your permission.

Most of us are conscious of only a small part of who we are. The rest lies below the surface and not may be known to you or anyone else. A healthy relationship is one in which we are loved and respected for ourselves in spite of our faults and shortcomings. Those who really know well and still care for us will encourage our best qualities. A healthy relationship is one in which there is a system of "reciprocal trade agreements," that encourages the best in each other. Nurturing each other's self-confidence and encouraging each other's better qualities is part of a healthy relationship that maintains each other's infinite worth and dignity. We all know what it is like to be with those who go on and on about their own interests without ever inquiring about you. So much of prayer and meditation requires active listening. To discern what the Spirit is saying, it is important to develop our listening skills.

During the formation of the early church the disciples were like sheep without a shepherd. They were vulnerable, fearful, and without direction. They relied on the Holy Spirit to guide them as the outward and visible signs of Christ's presence. They knew that with Christ as their Good Shepherd they could witness to him boldly without fear or trepidation. Without Christ, we easily go astray. With him as our Great Shepherd, we are led into the paths of righteousness and truth.