

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Today we have an interesting convergence of the liturgical and secular calendars. There is no observance of Mother's Day in the liturgical calendar, but we are all aware that it is today in the secular calendar. Amazingly enough, our scriptural passages this morning speak to a number of aspects of relationship between Jesus and his followers that might apply to some mother/child relationships. The focus in the scripture lesson this morning is on the identity of Jesus' sheep...who they are and how they come to be part of the flock...and the fact that they recognize his voice is one of the markers of identity.

We are aware of how powerful a familiar voice can be. As soon as we have developed enough in utero to have a brain and ears that work, we can hear sound. One of the first sounds we hear is the sound of our own mother's voice. And that sound stays with us for the rest of our lives. Whether our mothers are still here with us or whether they have left this world, the sound of their voice is still with us...powerful and persuasive. I don't know about you, but I can still hear my mother's voice in my head...usually when I least expect it and it is sometimes as unwelcomed as it was when she was here with me: "Elizabeth, stand up straight!" We all have those memories of Mother...some of them great, some of them good, some of them funny and some of them a bit distressing. Whether our relationship with Mom was a generally positive one or a generally negative one or somewhere in between, we know that voice. We will always know that voice. Before we arrived into this world, we knew that we belonged to that voice for good or ill. It is a powerful voice.

Jesus tells us the same thing about his own voice. He says to us, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." Jesus' voice is a powerful identifier. He and his followers are walking in the Temple in the portico of Solomon. It is during the festival of the Dedication, a festival that we know as Hanukkah when the Jews celebrate the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees in 164BC. This is a joyous occasion to celebrate its restoration after its defilement by Antiochus IV who erected a statue of Zeus inside the Temple and rode his horse into the Holy of Holies. This is a sacred celebration for the Jewish community and Jesus and his followers are there to celebrate.

Jesus' teachings and healings and miracles have caused divisions within the Jewish community. Some believe that he is, indeed, the long awaited Messiah and others believe him to be a

charlatan and a blasphemer. It is unclear in the translation of this passage whether the Jews that are asking him to “Tell us plainly if you are the Messiah!” are among those who truly want to be reassured that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah or if they are among the ones that are trying to trap Jesus into saying something definitive that can be used against him to try him for blasphemy. Jesus’ answer is not definitive, as usual, but his answer is helpful to us.

The ones who believe are Jesus’ sheep...even the ones who struggle with doubt and sometimes turn their backs. Even the sheep of the flock sometimes wander away. Even the sheep of the flock are sometimes obstinate. Even the sheep of the flock do not always respond when the shepherd calls. That’s doesn’t make them not part of the flock. It makes them sheep. Like us, the sheep aren’t perfect...they aren’t perfect in following directions, they aren’t perfect in obeying, they aren’t perfect in avoiding pitfalls, they aren’t perfect in staying with the flock. In short, they aren’t perfect. But they do know who their shepherd is. They do know where their safety is. They do know who will take care of them. They do know to whom they belong.

Jesus adds to his statement about his sheep hearing his voice. He says that he knows them and that they follow him. He gives them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of his hand. Those are powerful promises. That we can’t be stolen away from Jesus is a powerful promise of safety. That we shall never perish is a powerful promise of life everlasting. We can’t earn our way into the flock by subscribing to the correct doctrine or by figuring out the most obscure meaning of a Biblical passage or by not breaking any of the ten commandments. Our belonging to the flock does not depend on what we accomplish. Our being a member of the flock is by virtue of Jesus having made us one of the flock and claimed us for his own. It is at Jesus’ initiative. Our part is in our response to having been claimed by him and our willingness to follow him when he speaks.

There are voices in our world speaking to us all the time. How do we know that the voice we are hearing belongs to Jesus and not to some imposter?

The voice from Jesus can come in any number of ways. Of course, the more we know about Jesus and what he said and what he did, the more likely we are to recognize him when he speaks to us. The more we study him in scripture, listen to others speak of their own experiences, and share our experiences, the better we know Jesus. The best way to hear Jesus is to simply pay attention...to be listening for him. Sometimes Jesus speaking to us feels like a nudge in one direction or another. Sometimes it is a persistent thought that simply will not leave us. Sometimes it is a powerful experience that we didn’t necessarily expect. And sometimes it is a rebuke that, quite frankly, we don’t want to hear.

I recently had one of those rebukes. A few days ago, a man called here asking for some financial help. He didn't state his name, but said that he was just finishing drug treatment at Phoenix House and was trying to raise money for a deposit on a place at a halfway house when he was discharged. He needed \$300, but he told me that even \$25 would help him a lot. I told him that I couldn't help him. I told him 'no' for a number of reasons, but I didn't feel very good after I hung up the phone. The conversation with that man is still with me...and I wonder why I didn't help him when he asked. Even if I didn't give him money from the discretionary fund, I could have given him \$25 of my own money and not gone wanting for anything. Why didn't I help him? After a while, that question seemed to me to be from Jesus, not from me. It was a rebuke and if I had it all to do over again, I might make a different decision. Jesus speaks to us in persistent thoughts. The ones that won't leave us alone.

And Jesus speaks to us in prayer, but we need to be willing to be still and listen in prayer. If what we are hearing in our thoughts in prayers is not congruent with what we know about what Jesus taught us, it's probably not Jesus' voice. If what we hear is encouraging us to trust God, it probably is Jesus. If what we're hearing is telling us to cut corners or to lie because the outcome will be good...and the end does justify the means...it's probably an imposter speaking. If you hear a voicing telling you to be generous and to stop worrying about yourself, it's probably Jesus' voice. If you're hearing that you should be cynical and suspicious and critical, the voice is probably not Jesus'. If you're being comforted about some sadness in your life or you're feeling less lonely after prayer, the voice you were hearing probably belonged to Jesus. If the voice is telling you to keep your promises even though it turns out to be painful or inconvenient to do so, you are probably hearing Jesus. If you're hearing that you should let others down because it really won't matter, the voice you hear probably isn't Jesus'

In order to hear Jesus, you need to be willing to listen in prayer. Hearing requires listening. God gave us the capacity to do that. And Jesus has claimed us and speaks to us regularly. All we need to do is hear him when he speaks!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.