

Easter 4C 2019, John 10:22-30, May 12, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

When I was about 12 years old my parents gave me for Christmas a small tape recorder. It came with its own microphone and a couple of reel-to-reel tapes. This was before the days of the more convenient cassette tapes. I'd go around to people pretending I was a reporter and asked them their thoughts on various issues. But I can distinctly remember the first time I recorded my own voice and then played it back. I thought the tape recorder had broken because the voice I heard coming out of the speaker didn't sound like my voice at all. Everyone else I recorded sounded like they did when they actually spoke; there wasn't really any difference between their real voice and their recorded voice. But my own didn't sound like me. I remember playing back my voice to my parents and asking them if what they heard on the recorder was what they actually heard when I spoke. When they told me it was I was shocked. How could it be that what I heard when I spoke sounded different to others when they heard me speak? To this day, when I hear a recording of my own voice, I'm still a bit shocked and amazed at the difference.

It's a good reminder that there can be a difference between what you say and what other people hear. This is true not only with how you sound, but also in the content of what you actually speak. You speak some words intending to say one thing and someone hears them and interprets them in a much different way than you intended. This happened recently to a pastor, a Lutheran pastor by the way, in a sermon he gave that made the news. I'm not going to go into the whole content of his sermon; you can certainly do a quick computer search and find it. But he tried to make a personal confession about some dark thoughts in his own heart that were heard as a deep-seated prejudice against a particular group of people. I've read the sermon and can see what the controversy is about. I was also reminded of one of the first points driven home by our teachers of sermon delivery in seminary; people hear what you say through the lenses of their own experiences. The meaning they attach to the words you speak may be different than what you intend. That's not your fault, and it's not their fault. It's just the way it is, so you need to be always thinking how your listeners are going to hear you.

In this morning's gospel reading Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice." It's part of a larger passage in which Jesus speaks of his sheep hearing the good shepherd's voice and following him. Jesus' followers recognize his voice and can distinguish it from false shepherds who only want to lead the sheep astray.

So, how do we hear the voice of Jesus in our world? Especially in a world where the amount of communication has increased dramatically even in our own lifetimes. Does' Jesus' voice get drowned out in all the noise around us? How do

we know it's Jesus' voice and not some other? And given the difference between what someone says and how it's heard, do we hear Jesus through our own experiences and give his words the meaning we want to give?

I believe becoming aware of how we go about listening for Jesus' voice is an important place to start. I had a teacher who always reminded us that listening is not passive but requires active participation. To listen is to anticipate that you will hear something important. It means you are able simultaneously to hear many different sounds and even voices and still focus on the most important sound in your world. Take what's going on right now. Are you listening to me right now? Are there other things you are hearing? The sounds of other things you are thinking about, things you must do later today or in the week. Maybe it's a particular worry or concern you have. I'm not so naïve to believe that all of you this morning are hanging onto every word that I'm saying. I've sat in too many worship services myself hearing a sermon without really listening and then when it's all finished wondering what the preacher just said.

Jesus' voice doesn't come at us like a screaming jet engine or a jack hammer pounding the pavement on a city street. His voice may more often be quiet and subtle. I believe we hear him first where he promises to be. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Here, where his words are read and spoken, where we gather to worship and pray, Jesus speaks. In moments of prayer by yourself, sitting quietly and in devotion you may hear his voice. But there are other times as well you may hear your master's voice. Jesus speaks to us through the most poor and vulnerable in the world, the ones whose lives are often discounted by others who are on their way up. If we know anything from scripture we know that Jesus doesn't leave anyone behind, he is the one who seeks and searches for the lost.

We know there are other voices out there in the world. Distracting voices urging us to follow; to buy this or say that, believe this, hate that. Go this way, come on it won't hurt you it will be fun. It's very easy for us to fail to discern his will for us because it isn't always easy for us to separate his voice from the many others clamoring for our attention. Such is the nature of this complex 21st century world we live in, full of potential distractions. But sometimes these distractions are of our own making. It may mean you need to take the spiritual earbuds out of your ears and unplug yourself from the distractions and open yourself to the world around you where Jesus resides.

The promise here is this, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." First and foremost, Jesus knows us. He names us in baptism, he dies for us on a cross and he rises so that we might have life. We

belong to his flock, and we know his voice so that when he calls we can listen and follow. Amen.