

“A Familiar Voice”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2010
Scripture: John 10:22-30

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Holy and loving God who speaks to us and calls us by name, help us to hear and recognize your voice in the words we hear, speak and sing this day. Amen.*

I have a couple of questions that I really want you to answer. So raise your hands and let's see how we do, Okay? How many of you have dogs as pets? Quite a few of you, that's good. Okay, next question: How many of you have well trained dogs? H-m-m – Isn't that interesting?

I find it amazing to watch a well-trained dog and its master; perhaps I find it so amazing because I've never had a great deal of success training dogs myself. A well-trained dog will do what its master says. It is really interesting to watch what will happen with a well-trained dog if two people are giving it different commands at the same time. The dog may act confused for a moment or two, but it probably won't take too long for the dog to recognize its master's voice and follow its master's commands. In such situations, most of the dogs that I have tried training generally decide which voice to follow based on who is more likely to give them a treat instead of based on the identity of their master. That is not the case with a well-trained dog. A well-trained dog follows the voice of its master no matter what.

The greatest reason we come to church is to become trained to recognize God's voice. There many different voices in our world telling us to do very different things with our lives. These other voices are very tempting. They often seem to promise many more immediate treats. So we come to worship in order to learn to follow the voice of our master because we trust that

ultimately only our master has our best interests at heart.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters some religious leaders in the Temple who are not sure whether to accept or reject Jesus' voice. At best, they are genuinely confused. At worst, they are trying to trap Jesus. They say, “If you really are the Messiah, then tell us plainly. Come on -- out with it, Jesus. If this is so important, make it obvious.”

Jesus seems to respond by saying, “What more do I have to do to prove it to you? Have you not seen my works? Have you not heard my teachings? Is it not obvious enough already?”

“My sheep hear my voice”, Jesus goes on to say, “and they follow me.” This morning following the traditional service our session will meet with some people who want to become a part of the family of First Church. I don't know if you have ever thought about it or not. but in essence whenever someone decides to join the church, whether this one or another one, what we are asking them to profess is that they have heard Jesus' voice and that they intend to follow that voice.

And each and everyone of us, my friends, as members of the family of this church, have declared that we have heard Christ's voice and have promised to follow Him. Don't get too comfortable, though. Just because we've heard Christ's voice and responded does not mean that the other voices will stop. They will still be there - still offering other paths, other ways to live. Those other voices disguise themselves as being reasonable, respectable, and dignified. There would be no way to tell that they were not true unless you have heard Jesus' voice you recognize that there was something suspicious about those other voices they did not sound exactly like your master's voice.

Those other voices say things like, “Get an education, so you can make a lot of money.” Our master's voice says, “Get an education, so

you can more fully serve God.” Accordingly, education should be even more of an emphasis for Christians than for those who go to school to get rich. But Christians do not seek an education so we can make a lot of money. We get an education so that we can have the ability to use our God-given gifts and talents more fully in God's service. When education brings with it wealth, we remember that all that we are and all that we have really already belongs to God. So we earn all we can; save all we can; and we give all we can.

Those other voices (especially the ones on the diamond commercials on TV) say, “propose to marry this person because when you are around them they give you warm, fuzzy, romantic feelings.” Our master's voice says, “get married only if by doing so you can serve God more fully.” Warm fuzzies won't get you through the waking up in the middle of the night to quiet the crying baby or compromising your career path for the sake of your family. But a marriage that is grounded on the belief that God has given you such a love for one another is a marriage in which God's love will be perfected. A marriage that relies on the promises of God, not warm fuzzy feelings, for support in hard times, can weather storm after storm and come out stronger in the end.

The list of other voices could go on and on. Since the other voices are so numerous, once we have heard Christ's voice we spend the rest of our lives trying to sharpen our hearing so that even in the midst of storms when the wind howls and the waves crash we can still hear his voice above the rage of the storm speaking words of love and guidance.

To continue to develop our sense of hearing, we need to be in the midst of Christian community. On our own we are quite good at mistaking voices that appeal to our desire for immediate gratification for God's voice. Thus, God has given us the gift of worship, a gift of Baptism and Communion, the gift of Christian

fellowship, and Bible study. Of course, simply because we need community does not mean that we do not also need to develop our personal spiritual lives in private as well with devotional reading and prayer. All of these means of grace work together to help us recognize God's voice when God speaks.

What do we learn about recognizing God's voice from these means of grace? What is it about God's voice that once we have heard it helps us recognize it over and above all the other voices?

Sixteenth Century Swiss theologian Ulrich Zwingli listed 12 ways over the course of his life through which he had come to recognize Christ's voice. From that list, we get the well-known saying that Christ is the one who "comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable." I could read you the other 11 Zwingli came up with to remind himself of how Christ's voice sounded. If I did that, you would most likely get something out of some of them and yet many of you would probably leave the sanctuary this morning thinking to yourselves. "Boy, that Zwingli was really a faithful and articulate old dead European." So rather than read you Zwingli's list, I have six ways which I think make a whole lot of sense:

- no one will respect you as much or demand as much respect from you as Christ.
- No one will offend your prejudices as blatantly and treat your enemies as kindly as Christ.
- No one will demand that you care for those who cannot care for themselves as forcefully as Christ.
- No one will challenge you as much to grow into who you were created to be, while at the same time accepting you as you are completely as Christ.
- No one will forgive you as genuinely, and no one will ask you to forgive others as

persistently as Christ.

- Finally, no one will know you as truly, think of you as highly, love you as deeply, and seek what is better for you as consistently as Christ.

Over the years, I have learned that if I ever stop being offended by Christ, then I have stopped listening to him. Yet, if all I am is offended and I am not also loved, then I am not listening to Christ. Rather, I am listening to Satan tell me I'm not worthy of God's love. Christ offends while loving and challenges while forgiving. The last of those ways of recognizing Christ is that no one will seek for you good more consistently. Christ always wants what is best for God's children – for all God's children. He made sure to tell that to the religious leaders in the Temple when he assured them, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will ever snatch them out of my hand."

There may be other voices competing with his, but Christ will never stop calling, never stop holding, never stop loving, never stop seeking what is best for God's children. He may call you to walk through fire, but he would not do it if there was not a healing stream on the other side. He may call you to weather the storm, but he would not do so if the sun were not already shining beyond the clouds. He may call you to struggle against the very gates of hell, but he would not do so if he were unwilling to open the very gates of heaven and shower you with blessings.

These are just the kinds of things that our Savior does which helps us recognize his voice. These are just the kinds of things he does which help us know that he's the Messiah. These are just the kinds of things which remind us that we are his sheep and he is our Sheppard.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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