

HEARING HIS VOICE
John: 10:1-10
Sermon by Bryan Fredrickson
May 7, 2017

William James said, “Living religion is a matter of vision rather than of argument.” One’s vision is a personal matter, and its usually informed by one’s education and experience. What I’m about today is to talk to you about MY vision of this passage in John, that of a lay person, informed by my own education and experience.

This passage of John is often referred to as the Good Shepherd passage. Jesus is speaking to a group of Pharisees. When we think of Pharisees we generally have a negative opinion of who they were. But actually they were a group of people who tried to do the right thing. These were people who today would be your daily Bible reading Protestants or your daily communicant Catholics. They lived by the rules and they were faithful to their tradition. They, of course, interpreted life through legalistic eyes. John tells us that they didn’t understand Jesus’ words: “The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd,” Jesus says. “The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd.” This idea is repeated several times throughout the passage.

Let’s think about that for a minute. Communication requires a speaker and a listener. One can either be a casual listener (which is not really listening), or an active listener. In order to have true communication, one must be an active listener. It takes active listening to establish relationship. Just ask my wife, who tells me, “It’s about COMMUNICATION!” The sheep listen for the voice of their shepherd. There is relationship there between the shepherd and his sheep.

I love John’s gospel. Of the four gospel writers, John was trying to communicate something much larger than legalism or chronology or historical facts. His gospel is expansive, visionary, even mystical.

What do I mean by “mystical?” Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as, “The reality behind the veil of life.” My definition is a bit more prosaic: “Mysticism is a spiritual interpretation of life informed by one’s experience of the eternal.” It seems as I advance into middle age my faith is much less about what I BELIEVE and much more about the phenomenology of what I EXPERIENCE. I’m trying to get out of my head and into my heart. That’s not easy for a lawyer. We’re the modern-day Pharisees. But I think this passage in John is a good example of that. The Pharisees are in their heads and in their rule book. Jesus is speaking from his heart and he’s talking about relationship. No wonder the Pharisees don’t understand him!

To me, this passage is not about anxiously worrying if I’ve been called into the fold or if I’m hearing the right voice. It’s about becoming aware of the eternal Voice which is always present to every living creature. To hear it we must LISTEN WITH AN ATTUNED HEART, which are the first words of St. Benedict’s Rule. It is a Voice calling us into relationship, into communion with the Creator, with our fellow human beings, with all of creation. It’s becoming like the sheep in the passage who listen for the voice of their master.

The distinction I'm trying to make here is this: Jesus is talking to a group of people that believes one drives oneself into God's arms by following rules, by living good lives, by being blameless before others, by trying to be "perfect." Of course, none of them (or us) are. But that's beside the point. Jesus is telling them they won't find God by being driven; they will find him when they allow themselves to be DRAWN by his voice. I don't believe one is DRIVEN into the fold by a litmus test of belief. Rather, in my view, one is DRAWN into the fold by simply listening for the heartbeat of the eternal. John 6:44 ("being drawn by the Father"); John 12:32 ("Jesus drawing all people to himself.")

So, how are we drawn into the Mystery? One way is through nature. St. Antony, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure and other giants of Christian theology describe how there are two Bibles. The first Bible was born about 17 billion years ago. It is creation itself, which unfortunately we largely ignore or mistreat today. The other Bible is the one you and I are familiar with.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit and modern mystic, was a great observer of the natural world, the first Bible. He saw God's love manifest in every living creature and plant, even in minerals. His was a Franciscan spirituality, observing that all of life responds to the Master's voice or call in its purest form. It is the soul's longing to be connected to the whole. Our pets teach us about that. They are always aware, living their lives in the moment, accepting life and even death as it comes. My brother Dave says, "Animals are plugged in." Jill and I lived this experience dramatically recently.

As many of you know, we moved into a new house a few months ago. Part of the deal in buying the house were several stray cats, some feral, that have more or less made their home in our backyard. We have continued the tradition of feeding them and making them feel at home there. One of those cats, "Spatz," at first very timid, began to trust us and actually got close enough for us to touch. Eventually, Spatz would brush up against our legs, allow us to pet him, and even followed us around the yard.

Recently, Spatz got very sick and quickly wasted away to 4.5 pounds. He died one night before we could get him to the vet to have him put down. His diagnosis was advanced intestinal lymphoma. At the end, he could not eat or drink. Throughout the ordeal we saw in his eyes an acceptance of his fate. He did not try to "rage against the dying of the light," (as the poet says) but instead went with the flow of nature. He was not trying to deny his mortality. He was "plugged in" to the Voice that was calling him. Any of you who have had to put a pet down know this truth intrinsically. They seem to have an uncanny ability to accept their fate. There is something extraordinarily beautiful in that Mystery – as hard as it is on us who lose those little guys to death.

We think ourselves superior to the animal kingdom. But it is precisely our THINKING, our Aristotelean, egoic, logical minds, that get in the way of our experience of being plugged in. We cannot hear the quiet Call of his voice over the roar of our own self-serving thoughts and concerns that constantly serve our ego.

St. Francis knew this well. There are many documented stories where he talked to various animals. He would reaffirm to them their “loveliness” as creatures of God. His biographers document that the animals seemingly responded to his voice, understanding that they were in the presence of someone else who was plugged in.

There’s a wonderful story about how one day he came across an ant pile and after looking at it for awhile, he began preaching to the ants. He said to them that they were much too preoccupied with tomorrow; that they were working too hard. (Sounds like many of us, doesn’t it!) But even ants seem to be responding to pure Call, drawn into the Mystery of what it means to be an ant. Do we humans allow ourselves to be drawn into the Mystery of what it means to be human? Or do we live distracted lives in front of blue screens, whether they be TVs or computers or smart phones, hurtling from one news story to another, one text to another, one activity to another, one thought to another, one emotion to another? You know the answer. Fr. Richard Rohr said we’ve substituted blue screens for the big screen of the sky. We seem to be the only species free to consciously ignore the voice of the Shepherd that comes to us in the silence. It is ironic that love can grow and mature only when the soul is free to choose love. That is why our free will is so important. But our free will also allows to choose not to listen, not to love, not to come into relationship. This passage in John is about Jesus teaching the Pharisees (and by extension, us) why it’s important to listen for the voice of the Shepherd. And because we don’t, we live isolated, fear-driven, anxious lives, lives stolen by “thieves and bandits,” as Jesus said. We believe we live in a hostile universe.

When we are able to connect ourselves to the whole of creation, then we know that we belong in the universe and that we are God’s children. We are a part of the flow of life which is visited upon us daily in the form of the Holy Spirit. We are not isolated, wretched beings, just trying to be saved for some heaven later. It is our very choosing to be isolated, anxious, and fearful that has caused us to create our own hell on earth. Yet, as Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is within us; it is at hand. It is here and it is now, if we would only listen for it. We are part of his creation, and he loves us, and he is calling us by name, as the Book of Isaiah proclaims.

In our Eucharistic Prayer D we pray, “Fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and fill them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.”

We were created to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd inviting us to come into green pastures, into relationship with him. It is our disobedience that takes us far from him. But like the wind, his Voice is always as close as our next breath.

I want to close with a benediction by John Philip Newell, a Scottish poet and Celtic scholar:

“That in the elements of earth, sea and sky we may see your beauty,

That in wild winds, birdsong and silence we may hear your beauty,

That in the body of another, and the intermingling of relationship, we may touch your beauty,

That in the moisture of the earth and its flowering and fruiting, we may smell your beauty,

That in the flowing waters of springs and streams, we may taste your beauty,

These things we look for this day, O God,

These things we look for.”

Amen