

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 17, 2016
Year C

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Acts 9:36-43
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30
Psalm 23

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This statement comes in answer to a question about whether or not Jesus is the Christ. Jesus says that the reason people do not believe is because they are not one of the sheep, they do not belong to the flock. At first this may strike us as backwards. We think that one is a member of the flock because one believes. Jesus is saying here that the reverse is true; one believes because one is a member of the flock. "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." That is why we hold Baptism to be a sacrament and not merely a sign. That is why we are willing to baptize infants—because people come to mature faith in the Church, not outside of it. As members of the flock.

Well, if belief is not the mark of being a member of the flock, what is? "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." My sheep hear my voice and they follow me. This is the center of discipleship. A disciple is a student under a master. A disciple is one under discipline and obedience. To be a Christian is to hear Jesus' voice and to follow him. To be a Christian congregation is to hear Jesus' voice and to follow him.

There are two steps. We know that we must follow Jesus. He is our example and leader. We know we must walk in the way of the cross. We know that we must share his

cup. We know we are called to minister just as he ministered. We know we are given the Spirit just as he was so that we can proceed with power. But all that is the second step.

We cannot follow Jesus if we cannot see him. We cannot obey his voice unless we can hear his voice. Indeed, our word "obedience" comes from the Latin word, "audire," to hear or heed. "My sheep hear my voice and then they follow me." The word for hearing Jesus' voice, for perceiving Jesus' will for us is "discernment". We strive to discern God's will. Discernment is seeing with the eyes of Christ. Christian discernment takes two things very seriously. First, it takes sin seriously. Our sight is blinded or misled by our own desires, lusts, ambitions, fears, laziness, and so forth. Just yesterday I and Peg Sullivan were at a retreat led by the former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold. He quoted a fourth century spiritual master as saying, "Unawareness is the root of all evil." We do not notice when our own fears, needs, and desires are shaping our attitudes and decisions. Second, Christian discernment takes grace seriously. We do have the Spirit to guide us and direct us. God is already working in our lives and in the Church. God is already in us shaping us over time to be more and more like Christ.

Because discernment is seeking God's will rather than our own, it always involves a dying to self. More accurately, it involves dying to one's constructed self. It means becoming open to one's true self that is hid in the life of God. Certainly, one's own desires, inclinations and gifts are important data, but they are not the criterion for making a judgement or decision. We need to develop the capacity to say, "Not my will but thine be done." That is one of the ways in which the church is so helpful. In a Christian community, we learn to submit our choices to the discernment of the community. And sometimes we have to say, "I would not have made this decision, but I accept it as the

decision to which the Holy Spirit has led us as a community, and I will support it." We do not respond by cutting our pledge or not coming to worship.

Two particular capacities are needed for discernment. First we need to be able to listen. "My sheep hear my voice." We need to be able to be silent and listen. We need to be able to be silent in our private prayers. We need to be able to be silent together. We need to be silent so we can hear the other speak. We need to be silent so we can hear our brother or sister speak. We need to be silent so we can hear God speak. And remember that listening is very different from simply waiting for your turn to speak. As an exercise you might at the end of the day, think back over the day and the various conversations you have had and try to remember times when you really listened. It is to increase this capacity for listening that many Christian congregations and communities have silence at certain points in the service, particularly after the readings. This is not a time to find the hymn or read the announcements. It is a time to listen, to be quiet and listen. When we say Morning Prayer during the week, we take a full minute of silence after each lesson so that we have time to really get quiet.

The second capacity is to speak the truth to each other. To share what we have heard even if it is difficult or odd or embarrassing. In many groups I have led over the years we have had listening exercises. Typically, there is a short scripture passage and time to reflect on the Word of God in silence. Then we share with one another whatever has struck us about the passage. This practice helps us to learn how to share with one another. And it helps us get in the habit of listening to the Word of God first and then listening for the word of God in words of our brother or sister in Christ.

Discernment always involves the Church. An individual takes his idea and tests it in the community. Because of sin we should never trust our own private views. We can always convince ourselves that ours is a special case with extenuating circumstances. We need to check our view, our vision against external standards. Does my view conform to the Word of God in Scripture? What does the wider Church say about this in the tradition and in the current canons and Prayer Book? What do other Christians I know and trust say about it? Over and over I have learned that a group of Christians will almost always make a better decision than I make by myself. Time and again I have come to the Vestry or the Officers with my mind made up only to find the group reshaping it and giving far more sophistication than I ever thought of.

Discernment is always risky; and in two ways. First, discernment is risky because God's will may be something distasteful, embarrassing, painful, or even dangerous. It may be something I do not want at all. Second, you can never be sure that the decision you make is in fact God's will. All you can be sure of is that you have done your best to be careful and faithful and obedient to all the indications available to you. Part of Jesus agony on the cross must have been doubt; what if he had got it all wrong? And in the end he does what we all must do. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Now if discernment is so risky and so difficult, why bother? And the answer is, because that is how we participate in God's work in remaking us to conform to the image of Christ. As we learn to conform our wills to God's will, as we learn to see the world through God's loving eyes, so we become more like God in our characters. As we conform to God in our wills, so we shall be conformed to him in our life and our immortality. "My

sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

So let us work on discernment, let us work on listening to God in each other and in the Scripture and in the teaching of the Church. Let us learn to hear our Shepherd and to follow him.