

The Fourth Sunday of Easter + May 12, 2019

Finally! I have entered the world of podcasts and I've already identified favorite shows that I like to listen to: *This American Life*; *Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me*; *Religica*; a *lectio divina* podcast and a bunch of podcasts for political junkies. There're more programs to listen to than there is time to listen so I've had to discriminate and narrow down the selections, choosing the voices I enjoy listening to and choosing to ignore the ones that are dull or raise my blood pressure. In a very real way, I found myself choosing the voices I trust.

Long before I-phones or podcasts there were there existed something called the transistor radios. Remember those?

When I was in junior high and high school I listened to the radio quite a bit – music, ball games, news and I even discovered a religiously based program that piqued my interest. I was drawn to the program because the preacher said things I had never before heard in church. He had a commanding voice and projected an air of certainty and he scared the hell out of me. I think that was the point of the show. This hell fire and brimstone preacher regularly predicted the end of the world and I found it intriguing, especially as I was beginning to get more interested in the Bible and theology. Over time, my fascination with the program faded, especially when his characterization of God made God sound like a cosmic bully. I finally stopped listening because it wasn't particularly life giving.

Someone who incites fear is not a voice you can trust.

Whose voice do you trust? Whose voice can you trust?

Before we were married, Britt and I had a courtship that lasted about a year and a half. Much of that time we lived hundreds of miles apart. I was in Portland, Oregon and Britt lived in Pacific Grove, California. A good part of our getting acquainted was talking over the telephone every day, sometimes up to three hours a day. There was some advantage to getting acquainted over the phone: for one thing, I didn't have to worry about dressing up to go out on a date, but most importantly, speaking over the telephone made it easier to focus and listen. In our sharing of joys and sorrows, the trust between us developed and grew. I looked forward, every day, to speaking with Britt over the phone. I came to trust that voice.

Whose voice do you trust? Whose voice can you trust?

Jesus says: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." The sheep learn to trust the voice of the shepherd. We Christians have come to learn to trust the voice of Jesus. We want to follow him. We will follow the voice of one we trust.

Yes, we want to follow Jesus for we have come to trust the voice of Jesus, but that doesn't mean we always do!

Our lives are filled with a cacophony of voices clamoring for our attention and vying for our allegiance. Much of the time it's difficult to sort out which voices to trust and difficult to distinguish the voice of the Good Shepherd from other voices.

So, how do we distinguish the voice of Jesus from other voices? What's distinctive about Jesus' voice? How can we tell Jesus' voice from other voices?

I asked this question last Tuesday at our Lectionary and Lunch group. The responses were varied and rich and as the folks around the table were talking, I was taking notes. It's not the first time the Lectionary & Lunch group has helped me write a sermon and I suspect it won't be the last!

This is what they said: Community was identified as essential. You can try to listen for the voice of the Shepherd on your own but without the gift of others in the Christian community the path can be pretty rocky. We can't go it alone. Discerning how to live the Christian life requires give and take with other sheep. The group also spoke of prayer and scripture as essential. Someone else in the group identified the voice of love. Chances are, if you hear that you are loved or are nudged to love others then that voice is the voice of the Good Shepherd. Speech inciting hatred or fear sounds like the voice of a bad shepherd.

I found myself resonating with all the responses and I think they are all related and one way I've experienced all of these things coming together is when I hear the voice of the shepherd through other sheep. Often the voice of Jesus is echoed in the words and deeds of members in the body of Christ. In that great mix of people that make up the church you'll find prophets who speak a truthful word that both provokes us and enlightens us.

The voices of two such prophets were silenced this past week and the church has been grieving their deaths: Rachel Held Evans and Jean Vanier. Evans died way too young. Vanier lived to be ninety. Not only their life spans but their journeys were very different and they lived and spoke in different contexts but from what I could tell, they landed at the same place and each of them expanded our awareness of the breadth of God's love.

Rachel Held Evans was a prolific writer. The Spirited Women group recently read one of her books. Beaten up and bruised by her fundamentalist upbringing, she found herself returning to the church later in life speaking truth to power as she critiqued systems within the church that drove people away and as she lifted up those who had been excluded. In lifting up people in the margins – the poor, the forgotten, anyone discriminated against – she reminded us all that each of us is a mixture of saints and sinner. Everyone is loved and every person has an essential

dignity. In her prophetic speech she liked to remind us that the church of tomorrow will be led by those who have been excluded from the church. She liked to remind us that “the future is in the margins ... that’s how the Spirit of God works.”

Jean Vanier also focused on people in the margins. Vanier founded the L’Arche community. L’Arche is a global ministry whose goal is to work toward a more humane world. In L’Arche communities, people with intellectual disabilities share a common home where they are given essential dignity and valued for their gifts. Vanier helped us see that weaknesses and imperfections and pain are not to be hidden and they need to be a source of shame. This prophet provoked us to welcome the weakness of the others just as we must welcome it in ourselves. Those on the margins of the world have something to teach us. Learn from them. Vanier learned by living among people with disabilities the deep value of community and that everyone has inner beauty and strength.

Two prophets, Evans and Vanier, echoing the voice of Jesus whose voice is often heard from the margins. I have this image of sheep following the shepherd not on major thoroughfares but on paths that are hidden, out of the way, on roads less traveled. We are hard pressed to hear the shepherd’s voice in the dominant voices - so, what’s the difference between them and the voice of Jesus?

It boils down to radically different notions of power. There are plenty of voices around us and within us that want to pursue power over others, but I hear the voice of Jesus saying true power is in loving ourselves and others. It is the peculiar way of life that is rooted in the power of the crucified Jesus. The power of the almighty God is spoken in his vulnerable Son - Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection.

Henri Nouwen left a prestigious career as a chaplain at Harvard University. Feeling a need for a change in his life, he decided to leave a place where he felt he got caught up in a lot of competition to dwell in a place that felt more like the call of Jesus. So, he lived for a long while in one of the L’Arche communities. In reflecting upon his experience, he wrote these words: “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.”

The lesson today from Revelation says this is who God is and gives us a vision of God’s conquering compassion that will rule all in all. This power of conquering love that has saved the world and will one day encompass all the world. It’s a strange and wonderful power. In this vision, look who is sitting on the throne. Not a warrior or a king or an emperor but a slain lamb. This one will reign forever and will be our shepherd! What could this possibly mean? It means that the *shepherd knows us because he is with us*. Jesus, you see, is no stranger to our pain or

agony but knows it well and so knows us well and knows us intimately. Finally, it is this power, not the power of empire or domination, but this power that saves and changes the world.

I remember well the testimony of someone who said that the image of risen Jesus who bears the wounds of the cross was for him a most life-giving picture of God's character. He said, "this is a God I can trust ... I can trust a God who isn't removed from the human journey with all its joy and all its sorrow but one who knows it intimately. This is a God I can trust."

We want to know this God. We want to follow him. We want to hear his voice for God. Jesus' voice rings true and brims with authenticity. The voice of the shepherd speaks mercy and his voice prods us to be merciful.

No wonder we return again and again to hear this word for it is the word of the holy God. This voice we trust. Amen.