

“Who’s Your Shepherd?”

I’m sure a good number of us recall owning or using a tape recorder. I even recall using a reel to reel recorder on a few occasions. Then there was the cassette tape recorder. Every once and a while, the tape in a cassette would wind around one of the audio heads of the recorder/player and the cassette would be ruined. **Tape recorders were wonderful, in part, because, if the person, whose voice was recorded was no longer present with you, then you could still hear her or his voice by playing back the tape.** Hearing that person’s voice would remind you of the experience, which had taken place, when the recording was made. It was almost like reliving the experience. Does anyone have or use a tape recorder/player anymore? I don’t have one but my wife, Margaret, does. Most of the time she has used it to record the piano performance of one or more of her students. I doubt she has ever used it to just record someone’s voice talking. In fact, most of the time she wants a student’s performance recorded, I don’t think she uses a recorder. Instead, parents or the students bring an iPad to video record the performance or practice.

I’m reminiscing about tape recorders because there was a different experience when I just listened to the voice of someone, instead watching a video. Perhaps, it is the reality that an audio tape does not provide me with the visual of when it was recorded, so my mind remembers what was important about that event, including what I saw as I recorded or originally heard the other person’s voice. For example, yesterday, while I was listening to 90.1 FM – KERA radio, they played that recording of the first words of a human being stepping onto the Moon. I recall listening to the original broadcast of those words on a handheld portable radio, while I was riding home from a camp on a Greyhound bus. Yes, my cell phone has a voice mail function, which allows persons, whose calls I have missed to leave me a brief message. In my church office there is an answering machine, which also enables people to leave a message, when no one answers their call. But, usually those messages are fairly short and I wasn’t physically with the person when the message was recorded, so I do not have a visual memory of the other person during the message’s recording.

As I was preparing to write this sermon, the Gospel Lectionary Reading from the Gospel of John reminded me of my experience of listening to recordings of peoples’ voices and conversations. I especially remembered the experience of listening to the voice of someone dear or important to me after that person had died. **It was almost like being present with the person again. It was a special spiritual experience.**

In today’s Scripture, some of the people demanded Jesus clearly and unequivocally state whether or not he was the Messiah. Jesus responded to their demands by reminding them he had done so on many occasions. But then, he went on to explain why they failed to perceive he had revealed his answer to their question about his identity. **What I have attempted to share about the experience of listening to the voice of someone dear or special sometime after the person’s death is much like the dynamics Jesus attempted to reveal with reference to who it is that truly listen’s to his voice.**

In verses 25 – 27, the Gospel of John reported, “Jesus answered, ‘I have already told you, but you would not believe me. The deeds I do by my Father’s authority speak on my behalf; but you will not believe, for you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.’” In addition to pointing out his deeds were carried out by God’s authority and spoke on Jesus’ behalf, he went on to reveal the questioners would not believe his true nature because they were not his sheep! Now a days, many public personalities would stop their explanation right there. However, Jesus went further. This is where my listening to the recordings of the voices of persons important to me connects with our Reading. Our Shepherd declared, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

Listening to Jesus’ voice and following him is tied to him knowing us. He has a very special relationship with you and me. That relationship is much like that of a Good Shepherd and the sheep of his flock. Sheep follow the voice of their shepherd – someone they have come to depend upon and to trust. Their very lives depend on the guidance of their trusted shepherd!

Knowing that, it should not surprise us that Jesus also went on to say in verse 28a, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never die.” Now, to our ears, Jesus seems to be talking about life after death in the first half of the sentence but, then, he promised no death in the final half of the sentence. What did Jesus mean? Part of the problem is our pew Bible incorrectly translated what Jesus said. Because of the expectations of our culture – based on previous mistranslations, the public popular understanding about Jesus is his purpose was to give us life after death by paying for it in his own death. **However, the literal Greek words in verse 28a say Jesus stated, “And I give to them Life Eternal and by no means they perish unto the age.”**

That literal translation seems a bit awkward, doesn't it? Instead of sharing a long, detailed, description about the theology connected to those words, let me share Jesus' meaning through my own words. Jesus declared he gives his flock Life in the timeless realm of God's Kingdom, which they participate in now and this will not cease or die with the end of the Present Age – the time before the Kingdom of God is totally revealed and experienced. This means Jesus' flock – including you and me, are to live the New Life in Christ, which belongs to citizens of God's Kingdom, even now! **This New Life is lived by us as we listen to Jesus and follow his example.**

Listening to Jesus' voice – what does that mean? Clearly there are no recordings of his actual voice! So, we are dependent on what the New Testament, especially what the Gospels report as the words of Jesus. Thankfully, we also have the accounts of how Jesus related to people and responded to God's Purpose. His life, healings, and actions inform our understanding about what Jesus meant by his words. I urge all of us to become very familiar with what Jesus said and did, as reported in the New Testament Gospels. The Gospel of John is the only one of the New Testament Gospels, which was written by an eyewitness, and since there is abundant evidence of its higher degree of accuracy with reference to the setting, I especially suggest you study the Gospel of John to enable you to listen to our Good Shepherd's voice – to Jesus' voice. I also recommend you closely study the Synoptic New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But, closely examine the parallel reports in those Gospels, so you can begin to distinguish the personal emphasis of each of those gospels' authors from Jesus' own focus. For example, the Gospel of Matthew is much more likely to present Jesus as calling for a more faithful literal following of the Jewish Law than that which was practiced by his primary adversaries – the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. The result of Matthew's emphasis tends to encourage Christians to become modern day Pharisees. It is helpful to remember the Apostle Paul, who had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees, presented Jesus Christ as having overthrown the legalism of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law.

Listening to Jesus' voice and following his example leads to sacrifice and suffering because most of society opposes the welcoming and agape loving of all people. This world tempts us to use others to benefit ourselves. Jesus broke down all those selfish pretensions and modeled the Life of the Eternal – of the Kingdom of God – the life of Agape Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love. Although there are plenty of opportunities to be tempted to turn a deaf ear to Jesus and to close our eyes to his way of loving and living and even though following Jesus leads us to experience suffering and loss, if we put our trust – our faith in Jesus – in God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Agape Love, then what he went on to say in verses 28b and 29b provide us great comfort and encouragement. In **verse 28b, Jesus said about his flock – his followers, “No one can snatch them away from me.”** Further, he said in **verse 29b, “and no one can snatch them away from the Father's care.”**

So, what we really come down to is Who's Your Shepherd? Will you and I listen to the way of the Pharisees' self-righteous legalism, which excludes those unlike ourselves – will we listen to the world's self-centered selfish urgings? **Or, will you and I listen to our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and follow his ultimate embodiment of God's Way of Agape Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love, Grace, Healing, and Welcome?** Let's listen to our Shepherd, Jesus, and follow his example and life! Amen.