

Words to Live By: To Know

John 10:11-19

April 7th, 2019

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pastor Andy Kinsey

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”

John 10:14

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, amidst all the voices we hear in our world allow us by your Spirit to hear the voice of your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Homily

A father was reading the newspaper one morning and he decided to share what he had been reading with his son. The article claimed that more and more people were suffering from shorter attention spans. Furthermore, the article said that more and more persons, especially young persons, did not possess good listening skills.

When the father finished, he asked his son, “Well, son, what do you think about this study?”

The boy lifted up his head and said, “What’s that again, Dad?”¹

Sound familiar? It reminds me of the guy on the Geico commercial. He is watching television, eating popcorn. His wife walks in and asks, “Honey, does this dress make me look fat?”

And without blinking an eye, without even looking up, the husband says, “You betchya!”

Wrong answer! He may have heard a voice, but he obviously was not listening. (Then again, that sounds a great deal like me!)

¹ *The Pastor’s Story File* (Platteville, CO: Saratoga Press, 1992).

More and more commentators on American culture have said that we are living in an “age of distraction.” We are losing the capacity to pay attention to what is going on, to listening to others, to focusing on what matters.

There are many reasons for this. One study has found, for example, that stress is why persons are distracted.

1. 80% of the population indicate they have stress at work.
2. 50% says their stress has increased in the last 5 years.
3. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta reports that 80% of medical expenditures are stress-related.
4. 25% of driving accidents are due to distracted drivers.²

Something has changed. We live at a frenetic pace.

When I look at how at my own life and family, I am amazed at this change or shift in consciousness. I *know* how easy it is to become distracted by a text or an email, or by a tweet or Facebook post. And when I look at how much information I receive on a daily basis, it is easy to get overwhelmed.

Indeed, when I look at what our three children have experienced growing up in this new “normal” I realize how boring our own upbringing must appear to them. And yet, there are days when I think that maybe we had more because we had less. I wonder sometimes.

In an age of constant distraction, there is the dawning realization how communication with others also becomes more and more difficult. We live in our own little fast-paced bubbles or echo chambers, closed off to our neighbors, even though we may live next door to them.

I believe we are only scratching the surface here: It is much more difficult to talk about what is truly important. It seems that there has been a loss of affection and reflection as we are bombarded with the trivial on the one hand and the carnival of characters who want us to listen to them on the other: Politicians. Celebrities. Preachers. Athletes. Commentators. The list goes on and on. It seems *someone* wants to us pay attention to them.³

² Paul Hammerness, *Organize Your Mind, Organize Your Life* (New York, NY: Harlequin, 2011).

³ See Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Books, 2018).

The Good Shepherd

How interesting that the text *like the one we just read a moment ago still commands – hopefully – the power* to direct us to pay attention!

When Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, he is communicating something about a relationship, a relationship between the shepherd (him) and the sheep (us), a relationship that prompts us to pay attention.

But it is also relationship we may not always appreciate! That is, we may rebel against such a relationship between sheep and shepherd, for who among us really wants to admit we are sheep dependent on a Shepherd-God? Are we not more like cowboys, independent and self-assertive?

Well, when it comes to the Old and New Testaments anyway, there is this relationship between the people who continually see themselves as “sheep” and the God who seeks to protect and direct the sheep. There is this understanding about the people *who need guidance* and the God *who provides such guidance*.

Unlike the surrounding nations of that time that typically viewed themselves in terms of warrior-like qualities or fertility gods and cults, the Israelites proclaimed their dependence on a shepherd. Even King David, of all people, shares that the Lord is *his* shepherd. David’s desire was to be comforted and challenged (Psalm 23:1), reminding *us* that, if the greatest King in Israel needed comfort and challenge, then surely who among us can say that we don’t either?

Again, this cowboy image of independence is not something the Bible promotes. Rather, there is the word about *depending on* God, and not just any God, but the Shepherd-God who lays down his life for the sheep, *for us* (John 10:11).

After all, it is the job of the shepherd to do what it takes to protect the sheep, to lead the sheep. It is the job of the shepherd, if necessary, to defend flock and not flee when danger comes.

That’s what makes the shepherd *good* – laying down his life for the sheep, sacrificing himself for the welfare of the flock (John 10:11; 10:17-18).

Indeed, the word “good” here does not really capture what Jesus is truly saying, for the English translation does not do justice to the Greek word, which

means something more like “beautiful” or “amazing”: Jesus’ is the One who is *beautiful or amazing* for what he does, for the way he offers himself as a sacrifice, for the way he goes after those who do not belong to the fold (John 10:16).

Jesus makes sure the sheep, all the sheep, the weak and lost, are cared for. He is the *beautiful* shepherd (Luke 15:1-7).

Unlike the hired hands who run away at the first site of trouble, whose apathy and incompetence leave the flock open to other problems – Jesus is the One who stays with the flock (John 10:13-14).

To be sure, Jesus’ teaching here would have conjured up images from the prophet Ezekiel who also warned the people of Israel of “false” shepherds, or those who failed to care for the people, who left the nation in danger when under attack, whether internally or externally. Such false leaders were simply unfit for the job, as they demonstrated no concern for the sheep, especially for the injured, or the stray, or even those beyond the fold who were not part of flock (cf., Ezekiel 34:1-10).

That’s what makes the true Shepherd so beautiful: The Shepherd values the sheep, all the sheep.

Knowing the Voice

It is why the sheep learn to trust the Good Shepherd because they *know* he cares for them and loves them (Psalm 23:3). And they *know* the voice of the One who speaks their name (John 10:11).

And that’s our key word, isn’t it during Lent: to *know*? The sheep *know*, amidst all the other voices, amidst all the distractions – which voice belongs to the Shepherd, which one is truly trustworthy; unlike the bad shepherds who are there under false pretense, whose selfishness the sheep quickly realize when endangered. *The sheep learn to know the difference* between good and bad; for while slow at times, sheep *know* when someone is going to be there for them and when someone is not. They know the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:14).

I can remember in seminary when I went to Israel, I watched a shepherd guide his sheep. The shepherd had led the sheep to graze in a small pasture, and after a while, the shepherd hollered something. I don’t know what it was, but the

sheep sure did. All the heads of the sheep popped up, and right before my eyes they followed.

Today, I wonder if we are in tune with the Shepherd's voice. I mean, I wonder if we really want to listen to what the Shepherd is saying. After all, there is a side of this equation that begs the question as to whether we really want to admit that *we are sheep in need of a shepherd*. Individualists we are, who wants to confess such dependency?

And yet, I can't help but think of those times in my own life when I failed to listen to the Shepherd's voice, or when I sought to do things "my way" or go in "my own direction." After all, it's hard work to pay attention, to be humble enough to admit I need guidance. But slowly, over many years, if not decades, I, and hopefully we, learn to listen. Hopefully, we all learn to hear Christ's voice amidst all the other voices which vie for our attention.

To be sure, it is not automatic. Again, it takes practice to listen. For there are times that in our listening when we experience pain, even hurt: learning to know who God is and who we are and what God wants is not like turning on a cell-phone or operating a piece of machinery. Instead, it's more like trying to hear a whisper amidst the braying of a thousand sheep, knowing that amidst all the noise there is a particular Voice calling out our name, reminding us of who we are and the reason we belong here in the first place, as sheep of God's fold and lambs of God's pasture, knowing that the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for us and seek us out when we go astray, offering to us what no other shepherd can really offer – Life, abundant life, eternal life. May it be so!