

Hear, Know, Follow

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Text: John 10:22-30

They say talking to yourself is a sign of insanity. I hope that's not the case, because I do it an awful lot.

So I was grateful when I heard an interview a while back with Charles Fernyhough, a neuropsychologist at Durham University in the UK, who says this is completely normal. The way he explained it was fascinating: See, when we're toddlers and just figuring out how to do basic tasks—to brush our teeth, or to get dressed, or to put the pieces of a puzzle together—we don't know how to do these things on our own. We ask for help. And so, as we're learning to do these things, we're collaborating with the grown-ups in our lives, mostly our parents.

And you've seen how this goes, if you ever watch a parent and a small child working on a task like this. The parent and the child are in dialogue with each other. So the parent will say something like, "Put your arms up, through the sleeves of the shirt. Now we pull it down." Or the parent will say, "You don't need so much toothpaste, only a little bit, the size of a pea."

Over time, Fernyhough says, children start to learn to do these things for themselves, but they keep saying the words. The dialogue becomes a monologue. So you hear preschoolers getting dressed and saying to themselves, "Arms straight up, through the sleeves, pull down," "Not too much toothpaste, only a pea-sized dot." And then the child gets older, and the words are still there, but they're not voiced—they stay in our heads.

So, if you ever feel like you hear your mom's voice in your head, you're not crazy, you're not imagining it. You may well be hearing an echo she planted in your mind long ago. Her voice has literally become part of you.

"My sheep hear my voice," says Jesus today in our text. But it's clear that Jesus is talking about more than just words. He's talking about the trust and closeness we have with him, just like with a loving mother or father—an intimacy that comes from being together, doing together, learning together how to be God's children. Talk is cheap, words are a dime a dozen, but the relationship Jesus has with his flock is rare and precious: "I know them, and they follow me," he says. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

The gospel lesson we heard read this morning was brief, so let's unpack it a bit. Jesus is in Jerusalem, at the Temple. It is the Feast of Dedication, or what we know today more commonly as Hanukkah, a holiday that commemorates the miracle of the lamp-oil that lasted for eight nights as the Jewish people revolted against the Seleucid Greek Empire. Someone once said that most Jewish holidays boil down to three points: "They tried to kill us. We're alive. Let's eat!" And Hanukkah fits this pattern quite nicely. But that means that it's another one of those holidays, like Passover, that gives the officials from the Roman occupation agita, and the Jewish leaders who work with them too. Because when the people start remembering God's promises, and how God

fought so powerfully for them in the past, they start to get ideas that God might just do it again.

So the religious authorities are setting a trap for Jesus. They've seen Jesus upend the tables in the Temple and heal on the Sabbath. They've heard him talk about himself in unusual and challenging ways, claiming to be the bread of heaven whose flesh and blood give eternal life. The people are excited, and some think this Jesus may be the Messiah, the deliverer who will throw off the Romans and re-establish the Jewish nation. Jesus hasn't claimed to be the Messiah in so many words, so the authorities decide to force the question. After they have surrounded him, putting him on the spot, they ask: "How long are you going to keep us in suspense?" or perhaps better translated, "How long are you going to waste our time? Are you or are you not the Messiah?" If he says he's not the Messiah, then their problem is solved—the people following Jesus will be disappointed, and they'll go home.

But if Jesus says he is the Messiah, the authorities know that talk is cheap. They've heard the buzzing of the crowds, the people arguing with one another. The Messiah would do more miracles than Jesus has done, some say. Others say that the Messiah has to be a man of mystery, without a history or family, but this Jesus comes from Galilee, and Mary is his mother. The authorities know that if Jesus claims to be the Messiah, the crowds will test him against their own expectations. They'll take the Jesus they've seen and measure him against a thousand petty hopes and desires. Trust takes more than words. As much as the crowds hope for a Messiah, they won't be able to take his word for it. So the authorities press Jesus with false urgency: "How long are you going to waste our time? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Jesus refuses to bite. Jesus refuses to play their language game, a game designed to point the people away from what he came to do. "I have told you, and you do not believe," he says. But rather than rehash all the miracles he has performed, rather than offer up a new proof of who he is, Jesus puts his finger on the real difference between these pompous, scheming authorities and his tiny community of loyal followers: "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Talk is cheap. What attracts Jesus's followers to him is not compelling arguments with words or miracles. They follow him, because he *knows* them—like the disciple Nathaniel, who felt seen and understood by Jesus as soon as he met him; like the Samaritan woman at the well, who told others, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" Jesus knows his followers, his sheep, through and through.

But Jesus not only knows his sheep. Jesus invites them to follow him, and learn from him, just like we learn from our parents. You can see this unfolding when Jesus feeds the five thousand, and he has a playful dialogue with his disciples: "Where are we going to get enough bread?" And then he leads them step by step through the process of feeding the multitude. "My sheep hear my voice," says Jesus, "and they follow me." To follow Jesus means learning to do what he does. It means taking on the mission of Christ. It means putting flesh and blood on the love and grace and mercy of God, so that it can be seen, touched, experienced in us. And the only way this happens, the only way we can learn this is by hearing Jesus' voice, until it becomes part of who we are.

"My sheep hear my voice," says Jesus. "I know them, and they follow me." There is no answer Jesus can give to the religious authorities that can substitute for this kind of relationship of intimacy and trust, but it's only within this relationship that people come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

The story of Jesus and his sheep is our story. Jesus invites us to share in this life-

giving intimacy that comes from following him and trusting in him. This is meant to be a life of doing and learning alongside our shepherd. In our tradition there are a lot of words. Presbyterians like words, and we have some beautiful ones, especially in our creeds and confessions. But these words were never meant to stand on their own. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." Those are the opening words of the Apostles' Creed. By themselves, these are just words. Just words, until we follow Jesus, until we become part of his flock. Then we hear him saying to us, "Consider the lilies of the field... consider the birds of the air... see how your Heavenly Father cares for them." We hear him inviting us to set aside all that we have and all that we are for the sake of the kingdom. We respond to an invitation to risk and to trust in God's care. And only then do the words of the creed come alive. Now we really *do* believe, we really *do* put our trust in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, who provides for and cares for the whole creation, and for us!

Do you see how this works? Hearing the shepherd's voice—learning, doing, growing with Christ—is how we enter the kind of life where we can know that he is the Messiah, the Lord. Otherwise it's just words.

How are you being moved to go beyond words today? Where is God calling to you, like a parent to a child, coaxing you, guiding you, so that you can learn and grow?

What do you learn about yourself in this space, here or in places and communities like this one? I learned, from the time I was a child, that God's love is deep and wide as the ocean, big enough to swallow our guilt and hurt forever. We say the words, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And we're meant to learn to have our own spirits shaped by God's gracious love. We're meant not to hold others' guilt against them, and to look always to offer others the same freedom and peace we've found in God. Say the words, repeat them, but let them sink in—love as you are loved, forgive as you are forgiven.

What does it look like to embody this...

... when millions of our neighbors experience racism and exclusion?

... when children and adults made in God's image suffer the impact of war in Syria and Ukraine and Eritrea and so many other places?

... when those displaced by war or gang violence or natural disasters throughout the world come seeking a welcome in our neighborhoods?

... when women already making difficult, heartbreaking choices about childbearing face new burdens we impose through law and moral condemnation?

I don't want to resolve all those questions today. I just want to invite you to listen for the voice of love, the voice of grace, the voice of the Good Shepherd, and consider how that voice might be calling, might be forming you to live in the world today?

No words can resolve for you whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. It's got to be lived, embodied, realized in your life. Listen for the voice of the good shepherd, and everything else—all your hopes, your hurts, your fears, your prejudices, your expectations—it will all fall into place. Talk is cheap, but the life-giving intimacy Jesus promises is beyond price. Come and see. Amen.