

## Validation, Voices and Ventilators

### *John 10: 1-11*

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup> The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

<sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup> Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

<sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

<sup>11</sup> “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

One of our awesome deacons and beloved members, Bea Stuber, told me a story about what her dog Lizzie does during our Zoom worship services. She said that on Sunday mornings when I pop onto Zoom and start talking, Lizzie darts into the room, hops up onto her lap and tries to say hello to me through the screen. Lizzie and I have gotten to know each other over the last few years, especially as Bea endured chemotherapy. Lizzie responds the way she does because she knows my voice. Like a parent who knows the unique sounds of her child’s cry, or how a baby knows the tenor of her mother’s words. Jesus says we know his voice and we will follow it into pastures of abundant life.

I have to be honest, in the past this text has not been my favorite. For one, if someone were to ask me what Jesus’ voice sounds like, I wouldn’t exactly know what to say. I mean, it’s not a recognizable voice like Morgan Freeman’s or James Earl Jones’. It’s not a voice that has been seared into my memory like others have. Second, the metaphor of us being sheep doesn’t do much for me. The metaphor has taken on a literal meaning, as if to say that we are Jesus’ sheep, and as part of his flock we need to follow him blindly because, you know, that is what sheep do. Not to mention, whenever I have heard someone being called a sheep—especially these days—it’s not meant to be a compliment. So what’s Jesus saying?

To understand what Jesus means we have to realize who Jesus is speaking to when he says he is the good shepherd. He is addressing a group of religious leaders who just ridiculed him for healing a blind man. They told the blind man that he was a sinner from birth. They called Jesus himself a sinner for healing him, and then said that if anyone claims Jesus as the Messiah they will immediately be excluded from their flock. In other words, we have a bunch of religious

people saying that if you don't believe what we believe about who is a sinner and who is not then you don't belong. Sound familiar to anyone?

So Jesus is responding to a group who in the name of God have excluded those like the blind man because their understanding of who is in and who is out is too narrow. So Jesus says, "No, no, no. The God you are following is far too small! I am the good shepherd. These are God's children too and they know the sound of love and grace when they hear it."

We are witnessing a lot of people following a lot of different voices these days. Some of them offer sound guidance and care, while others are like thieves whose intention, as Jesus puts it is to, "steal, kill, and destroy." We are seeing toxic behaviors and language and rhetoric by some of our leaders in political and religious circles. And the scary thing is that whenever I speak to followers of these certain groups, they sound a lot like the leaders they are following. Why? Because the voice that we listen to, is also the voice that forms our beliefs and actions.

There was an interview on NPR where they were interviewing a college student who just lost his mother to COVID-19. The problem was that she was an avid subscriber to a certain news outlet that told her the coronavirus wasn't a big deal and that going about her life as normal was the best thing for her and her country. She trusted these voices and she followed them. They asked the young man what he would want to say to others who listen to the same voices. He essentially says the same thing Jesus does: "Theirs are voices that steal and destroy and whatever you do, don't listen to them." Some voices offer sound judgement and balanced guidance. Others redistribute blame and subtly hint at injecting disinfectant. Some voices affirm our humanity and fill us with hope, while others are like a blackhole that vacuum the life right out of us.

This leads me to wonder: Whose voice are the protestors, who decided to put themselves and others at risk by not following the advice of experts, whose voice are they following? Or the group of white militia men who put on their camouflage gear and stormed the governor's office in Michigan with assault rifles. Whose voice is inside their heads? Or the lawmakers who are saying that the old folks *should* risk sacrificing themselves for our country and the economy, whose voice says that!?

There are voices which demand life, and then there are those which offer it. Which is what Jesus means when he says that he lays down his life for his sheep. He does not do what he does to make us feel guilty or ashamed. He does not offer himself to a blood-lusting, vindictive God who demands an obedient and pure sacrifice in order to be satisfied. No. Jesus does what he does as God's ultimate validation for how God truly feels about who we are.

In Chicago, journalists for the Chicago Tribune, who used to write about sports or social justice, are now having to become writers for the obituary section due to the mounting numbers of deaths in the city. They are capturing powerful stories about the legacy of every person—no matter if they were wealthy or poor, or what side of town they lived on. Every life gets equal attention. Whose voice are they listening to?

There was one story in particular that stuck out to me. It was about a man in his 80's, who, during a peak moment when the hospital was short on ventilators, he told the doctors to take him off his so younger person could have a chance at a full life.

This is the kind of sacrifice Jesus is talking about. About a shepherd who is so fond of us, that he lays down his life so we might experience a full life, filled with peace, forgiveness and joy.

Some voices demand life, others offer it. Which is why your voice matters so much right now. So keep offering your amazing, grace-filled, light-beaming, full-of-compassion, life-affirming voices. Because God is about validating all of God's children. And we all know the sound of love and grace when we hear it.