

“He’s Got Us”
April 25, 2010
4th Sunday of Easter
John 10:22-30

I remember seeing a movie in which the great comedic actor Walter Matthau (I really miss him) portrayed an aging bachelor playboy, who had spent his way through his inherited fortune until it got to the point where there was virtually nothing left. His friend and financial advisor had been warning him all along that his money was running out, but he ignored the facts and kept at his spendthrift ways at breakneck speed. Finally the time came when the fortune was totally depleted, and his advisor was trying to tell him the stark truth. He told him several different ways, but each time the Matthau character acted as if he didn’t understand. Finally, totally exasperated, the advisor said, “Reggie (I think that was the character’s name), you have no money left.” Reggie replied, “What are you trying to say?”

We seem, in this society, to value plain speaking - for people to say what they mean and mean what they say. We want it from our politicians, and they often will try to oblige with sound bites claiming that they are more plain speaking than their fuzzy-headed opponents. We get suspicious, that someone is trying to hide or obscure something when they don’t just put it out there simply, plainly, and concisely. But there is also the other side of it, that sometimes we don’t want to hear the plain truth, would rather have it obscured so that we don’t have to deal with it.

But it’s also true that some things are too complex to capture in a sound bite, or even to talk about *plainly* because they are inherently complex or even beyond understanding. That’s the trouble with trying to talk plainly about the things of God, because the things of God are anything but plain. There is nothing plain about a God who speaks from a burning bush and is named “I Am Who I Am.” Will Campbell, a very plain-speaking Baptist preacher once remarked that if Moses had reported this experience to his family and friends, they would likely have said, “It’s time for Thorazine.”

In the passage from John’s gospel that we read this morning Jesus is “surrounded” (the meaning) by some demanding inquirers, who insist that he tell them “plainly” whether he is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one of God, or not? This was no polite crowd, gathered round an interesting speaker to debate a theological point. No, by the end of this encounter, John says, they were ready to kill him, but he slipped away.

Jesus replied that he has already told them plainly what they need to know – it’s just that he has told them through his works. It seems that who Jesus is can’t be reduced to a title, as if once you’ve got the title straight you know who he is. No, his role and his identity have to be experienced. This becomes clear as Jesus rolls out the analogy of the sheep and the shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd not because they’ve gone through some kind of rational, intellectual exercise but because they have experienced the shepherd and his works. It’s like a child who knows and trusts his or her mother

because of experience, not reason. It's no accident that Jesus elsewhere says "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."

It's not that it isn't important to seek understanding, and our minds need to be engaged in the discernment of faith and the ways of God. After all, the first and greatest commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." But I am recognizing more and more that it simply isn't adequate to rely on the intellect, on what we *know* in our minds, as the primary way into relationship with the God who saves us. I'm not speaking just of scholars, many of whom have a deep and abiding faith, but of the approach, across the theological spectrum, that wants to argue about who believes the right things about God and who Jesus is – and how that can keep faithful people tangled up with words about God, instead of walking in the ways of God.

Having said that, it's important also to say that just as "right thinking" doesn't ensure true understanding, it isn't just about having the "right" feelings, either – that somehow when it comes to faith and our relationship to Jesus Christ it's more about the heart than about the head, that swaying to a gospel song is more genuine than high mass at the cathedral. The heart can be as easily deceived as the mind.

When Jesus speaks of sheep and shepherds, our mind's eye likely moves to pastoral scenes, or pictures of Jesus holding a little lamb in his arms. Images of green pastures and still waters present themselves. But in the tense and even potentially violent context of today's reading, where Jesus' inquirers found his words offensive and opposition to him was building, he would have us see a different image, an image of all the predators out there who work to snatch the sheep from the shepherd's hands. "My sheep hear my voice; and I know them, and they follow me. . ." But hearing the voice of the shepherd above the cacophony of all the other voices that call us and claim us – voices of success and recognition, voices of control and self-sufficiency, words and voices that would define our worth and define our identity in any terms other than that of a beloved child of God – hearing the voice of the shepherd through and above all of that – as someone said, it's like being a stray dog at a whistlers' convention.

So our primary task, those who would follow Jesus, those who want more than a window-dressing faith, more than a faith that fits comfortably with our own preconceived notions, more than a God who conforms to our casual expectations – but a faith takes risks, that seeks a freedom deep in the heart of God, a faith that sings in words and in works - our primary task, then, is *listening* – training ourselves to hear his voice above all other voices, to daily connect with that voice that says, "*This way. You belong here, with me!*" Through scripture and prayer, through worship and holy conversation, through true fellowship and faithful service, to train and tune our hearts and minds, our soul and strength, to the frequency, the timbre of his voice.

The call of the shepherd, the call to follow, isn't into some enclave, safely hidden away in church or in theology, with those of like mind or social condition – but into the kingdom of God, among the "least of

these.” It’s where God rules the heart and the mind, where the love and justice of Christ move the hands and feet. “You belong here, with me.”

We should have no illusions that being *safe* in Christ means we will somehow be spared something of the resistance and the opposition that he faced. It’s just the opposite, really. We’re walking into the teeth of it, into encounter with the threats and resistance of the world to the rule and the reign of God and his Christ. Of this we can be assured, for it is as plain as day to those with eyes to see that the power of evil rises to meet the power of holiness. We should not deny that it is a battle, but it’s a battle that is to be fought with the weapons of love and mercy, forgiveness and compassion. That doesn’t always sit well in this world of ours. They are nice words, even pleasant sounding words. But when the call to love comes up against our own fears or the hate of others, or the call to mercy is confronted with the desire for vengeance, when the call to forgive meets the reality of our own hurt or pain, or compassion calls for us to actually share in the suffering of others – our only safety, our only true security, is in being held in the hands of the One who has been there before us – and who, by the power of God, has defeated even death and goes ahead of us into the world where we are to join him now and live to God eternally. He will never let us go, even as we tremble in the shadow of the cross that he said would be ours as well as his own.

When we were little, my brother and I liked to walk up the steps to the second floor of our house along the outside lip of the steps, on the other side of the bannister from the steps themselves. The spindles that held up the bannister that we hung onto as we made our way up on the edges of the stairs continued along the edge of the hallway on the second floor, and they held up a railing at the top of the stairs. Sometimes we’d reach out and grab the spindles and pull ourselves from the edges of the stairs up over the rail onto the hallway. We weren’t allowed to do this, of course, but it was just so tempting. Once, when we were about 7 and 9, my little brother made his way up the stairs in prohibited fashion, and he reached over to grab at the higher railing when his hands slipped. He was able just in time to grab at the lip, and hung there by his fingertips, screaming his head off. Some friends of our parents were visiting, and Bus heard Dale screaming and came running up the stairs to reach over to grab Dale before his fingers slipped and he fell to the floor 12 feet below, which is a long way when you are seven. As Bus reached out over the bannister to pull Dale to safety, he said, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

“No one shall snatch them out of my hand,” Jesus says of those who would hear his voice and follow. He’s got us. He’s got us.