

**THE VOICE OF JESUS; JOHN 10:1-10; EASTER IV, MAY 5, 2020;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

I have two wonderful books in my library; one titled, *The Faces of Jesus* and the other titled, *The Face of Jesus*. I am sure there are many other books on this theme: that Jesus had a face, that Jesus was human, that Jesus had a voice, that Jesus laughed and wept and sang and told stories, that Jesus had friends.

These two beautiful picture books include depictions of Jesus in paint and sculpture over the centuries; they have illuminating text as well. Fred Buechner, a favorite writer of mine, is the commentator for *The Faces of Jesus*. The point of both books is to gather up the many portrayals of Jesus through diverse cultures and ages, from diverse groups and styles of artists, even in the eyes of children.

There are two main take aways: first, that Jesus gets depicted in art in ways that the age and culture of the artists will recognize. Which is obvious enough. The point is Jesus is not a stranger but familiar, beloved, in as many different renderings of him as there are. Whether from antiquity, the middle ages or present day we see Jesus in the particularities of our own time and place. In other words, Jesus is in relationship with specific people at specific times in history. He is, we could say, a living presence.

The second take away is that the two books show Jesus at every stage of his ministry. As much as he is different in the garb and expressions of different times and places he is the same in his teaching, healing and preaching; in his suffering, dying and rising.

His ministry delivers faith, hope and love; justice, peace and reconciliation to those who follow him from Nicodemus the biblical scholar who met him one night under the cover of darkness so he would not be seen talking to this lowly rabbi; or Pope Francis preaching his Easter sermon, a month ago, from an empty room but in front of television cameras for all the world to see.

While we may see Jesus in his physical appearance differently, his message, ministry, and mission remains the same. This morning when he says, "I am the gate to the sheepfold," and "I am the Good Shepherd" whether in Aramaic to his disciples, in Koine Greek to John's readers or in English to you and me, what he offers is the same: the ability to recognize him, access his living presence, and receive his love, nurture, and guidance which is why God came to us as one of us.

I hope you did not receive that bogus email from me last week. Apparently, one of the opportunities the pandemic offers to cyber-scammers is the chance to prey on the good will of people under the guise of their pastor, teacher, coach or therapist by describing a dire situation that requires money either by wire transfer or credit card.

Several of you informed me that you received one of these emails supposedly from me but that looked suspicious to you. Most of you said "it didn't *sound* like you, Tom." What you meant is that the language the scammer used was not my language or "my voice."

Contrast that with the phone calls our deacons, membership committee, and staff have been making to many of you during self-isolation. Last Monday I called a church member in Florida. We talked about Florida vs. New York handling the pandemic and self-isolating with family among other things. Before we hung up she said, "It's good to hear *your voice*."

The point of Jesus identifying himself as the Good Shepherd and as the gate to the sheepfold is to remind us that like his physical presence in this life, his risen presence in the life of the church is not mysterious or bizarre but familiar.

He says the sheep will know the shepherd by *his voice*. "They will not follow a stranger, but run from a stranger because they do now know *the voice* of strangers. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. But I am the gate whoever enters the sheepfold by me will have life and have it abundantly."

Jesus is telling us we will know *his voice* when we hear it. Like hearing the voice of a loved one, friend or family member we will respond, not in fear as we would to a stranger trying to deceive us he is Jesus, but in the context of our relationship with him. Jesus' voice works like the voice-recognition security system some banks and investment firms you're your voice gives you access. When we hear Jesus, we know immediately that it is Jesus; the very sound of his voice activates our memory of him, what he said, how he cared for and stood by us, answered our prayers, and rescued us. We follow him into and out of the sheepfold through the gate. The sheepfold is the community; it gathers for safety, protection and feeding; then it goes out again in service to the world.

John's community of Christians was under siege. They were attacked by those who regarded them as a threat to established religious institutions and to the state.

Plus, the era was like a spiritual petri dish, there were all kinds of cults and religious movements throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Gnostics were the biggest and most successful. They looked and sounded a lot like Christians in reverence for Jesus Christ but with whom Christians had major differences; for example, the Gnostics believed, though he looked human, Jesus was really a divine creature who only *appeared* to suffer and die. Nor did the Gnostics believe God created the earth because of the suffering and death in this world which they said was evil. Spirit is good. The material world is the prison of the soul.

It was, to say the least, a difficult time to be a follower of Jesus. Add to the cacophony of religious messages and claims of other groups, the targeting of Christians because their movement was growing and a threat to almost everyone else. Many of the Christians left their Jewish families and synagogues to follow Jesus; their loved ones were not happy about the new religion and if they were unable to win back family members they regarded them as apostates (those who reject the faith) – a more serious charge than a heretic (who believed in *another version* of the faith).

An analogy of this acrimony and divisiveness is today's culture wars. About fifty years ago conservative and liberal politics became a more important mark of purity of belief than theology across the religious spectrum. A liberal Presbyterian, for example, would have more in common with a liberal Catholic or liberal Jew than with a conservative fellow Presbyterian.

I recall heated discussions at the dinner table when I was in high school and college back in the day when families gathered for dinner; I thought my Republican, Nixon supporting parents were from another planet.

You can imagine the same heated conversations going on in Jewish families in the first century; Christianity was barely a religion, those attracted to it clashed with their Torah-studying, kosher relatives.

The same kinds of divisions were shattering religious life in first century Palestine. We are talking about more than intellectual differences. We're talking about social-cultural identity, standing in the community, matters of conscience and behavior.

Christians were risk-takers. They had to live with all kinds of uncertainty and rejection. They took to heart Jesus' teaching to love their neighbor, to show their allegiance to Jesus by their non-violence and acts of loving even those who persecuted them. They believed that servant love—which was the badge of their new faith—would enable them to prevail over any hardship they encountered.

And *most of all* they believed they were not alone. They knew that Jesus was with them and would guide, protect and support them through the social rejection and enable them to the good news to a dark world.

This is why the *human* Jesus is so important—and why from St. Paul to Jonathan Edwards, to Bishop Tutu to Thomas Merton to Frederick Buechner to Barbara Brown Taylor and any number of other very special people urge you and me to have a *personal relationship* with Jesus. If we are risking everything like those first followers did we will need more than an idea to inspire us; we will need a wise, loyal, loving, devoted friend.

What would a personal relationship with Jesus look like? It would look like the relationship we have with a trusted friend or mentor. And it would mean we could summon his voice at any time but especially in difficult moments.

We are in the season of Eastertide; this is the time when the church celebrates the risen Christ; John is writing *after the resurrection*; he is telling us that we can recognize Jesus' voice *after he has physically left this world*. It means we can hear, talk with, and consult him now 2000 years later.

I remember some years ago I was invited to be on a panel at The Presbyterian College at McGill University in Montreal where many of Canada's Presbyterian pastors are trained. Another panelist was of a more conservative orientation.

Back in those days the debate over ordination of gays and lesbians was rooted in a larger societal debate about same sex relationships and the nation and church were divided. The ordination question was raised. The other panelist said the bible condemned same sex relations (which it does in only seven places: rape in time of war, prostitution at fertility temples, or serial promiscuity). His reading was blanket condemnation of anything same-sex.

When I was asked the question, I said Jesus was silent on monogamous same-sex relationships. Which given the injustice he *did* condemn raised some questions. I said as I read between the lines, as I listen to what he says to the hungry, the rich, the widow, the sick I hear him saying "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you and learn of me for my burden is light." I said, I can't imagine that voice rejecting anyone because of sexual orientation.

I tell that story to say that in that room with students, faculty and alumni, in a conservative leaning seminary, it was for me a 'come to Jesus' moment.

What could I say that would be respectful of my hosts, yet stand for what I believed in a way that might nudge others who disagreed with me to consider another point of view.

Then it came to me. Jesus' voice. That's when I heard him say, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden..."

Yes, he was silent on same-sex relationships; therefore, given what the bible does say, my conservative colleague was charging, is enough to say same sex relationships are sinful. The implication is that Jesus disqualifies himself by his silence.

But in the few minutes I had to contemplate what I would say I knew that was wrong. Jesus, the risen Christ surpasses the bible. That's when I heard Jesus speaking to all of those cast out and condemned by society. That's when I saw him welcoming them home, giving them a place at the table, pointing to them as exemplars of the faith.

What I finally said to say to my conservative colleague was if Jesus was here, *and I believe that he is* – in each of our hearts and in the Holy Spirit that hovers over this gathering – he would welcome gay and lesbian men and women and gladly commission them to do his work in the world.

What I am saying is that if we ask him anything, if we are in some bind or at some crossroads or facing opposition for who we are or what we stand for—he answers us.

So go ahead. Ask for guidance, for support, for anything you need; and listen as carefully and intently as you do worrying about whatever matter it is that burdens your heart.

You will hear and recognize his voice. He will guide and protect you even as a Good Shepherd who watches over the sheep. Follow him. Amen.