

**Our reading is from the Gospel of John Chapter 10 from verse 1 through to verse 10 reading from the “The New Revised Standard.”**

"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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

**Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.**

***Thanks be to God***

“Absolute pitch” -- or as it is more commonly known, “perfect pitch” -- is the ability to identify the pitch of a music note simply by hearing it, or to sing that note without hearing it first. It is a gift with which about one in every 10,000 people are born with.

Musicians and psychologists have for decades argued about whether absolute pitch can be taught. Most come down on the side of “*well, sort of.*” Most however seem to agree that no one can be taught note identification as an adult.

Young children, however, especially those who already have a gift or ear for music, can be taught note recognition by the sound. But to retain this ability they must practice it daily. If they don't, they lose it fairly quickly.

And everyone agrees that having the gift of absolute pitch does not make a person a musician any more than being able to identify colors makes a person an artist. Music is as much a discipline as it is an art.

Communication theory identifies “noise” as anything that hinders communication, by distraction in any number of ways. Some noise hinders communication by making us deaf to the sounds around us.

This is as true in the ethical/moral/spiritual realm as it is in the physical. Some noises can actually deafen us to the sounds and voices that we really want and even need to hear.

There's a lot of noise out there clamoring for our auditory attention -- lots of voices that want to be heard and are speaking so loudly that they can damage the hearing of those who listen to them, deafening them to the voice of the true shepherd.

The gospel lesson this week uses the idea of sheep hearing and identifying their shepherd's voice and compares it to the followers of Jesus being able to hear and identify his voice among the cacophony of noises that assault us every hour of the day.

No one, it turns out, has the type of perfect pitch required to identify the voice of Jesus every time he speaks. It is a skill, a discipline that must be learned and practiced. But it can be done.

Take the example of sheep and shepherds from this week's gospel text for instance. According to this metaphor there are two tests that the sheep use to identify their authentic shepherd.

The first test is that of approach. In first-century Palestine, shepherds would pool their resources to build a sheep pen so that their sheep could be confined and protected after dark. They would then pay someone (or take turns themselves) to function as the gatekeeper, guarding the sheep. Other shepherds were then free to sleep at ease, knowing that the sheep were well cared for.

The same was often done when the shepherd came into a city. The sheep would be corralled overnight while the shepherd attended to business, purchased supplies, rested, ate, bathed, and did those things that could only be done in town.

In either case -- rural or urban -- the shepherd would return in the morning, often before dawn, to claim the sheep that had been left in the corral and return with them to the grazing land.

As the true shepherd and the rightful owner of the sheep, the shepherd would enter the sheep pen through the gate. There was no need to sneak into the sheep pen, to climb over the back fence and enter unseen. He would simply approach the gatekeeper, pay the boarding fee, gather his sheep, and be on his way.

The second test is that of familiarity. The shepherd had spent countless hours in the field with the sheep. He had sung to them to calm their fears. He had talked to them. While they might all look and seem the same to an outsider, he knew them so well that he could tell them all apart. He had given a name to each sheep in his flock, and he knew, called, and spoke to them by name.

And they knew him. They could tell his voice from any other because they had heard it so much and so often that it was instantly recognizable to them. They had well-trained ears. Another might call them, but it was only to their shepherd's voice that they would respond. It was he who had earned their trust and their obedience through long hours of intimate proximity.

The shepherd knew the sheep, and the sheep knew the shepherd. They have what we might call a relationship.

Now, compare that relationship to the one which the thief has with the sheep. His only desire is to profit and benefit personally from the sheep, a task which he would accomplish by sneaking into the sheep pen, killing them quietly and quickly so they couldn't make noise, and then stealing away with his bloody prize back into the darkness from whence he came. He does not know the sheep. He does not care about them. He sneaks in, takes what he wants, and sneaks out again. His only mission is to benefit himself.

Case in point is the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team, Donald Sterling. Sterling has given so much money to causes that support the African-American and Latin communities in Los Angeles that he has been given one lifetime achievement award and was about to receive a second one from the local chapter of the NAACP the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People. In light of the revelation that he is a racist however this decision was reversed on April 28.

So how is it that Sterling, who is capable of such apparent generosity, can speak so viciously against those same people in his private and, according to other witnesses, his business life?

We all realize that giving to charity benefits the giver as well as the recipient. And no one would reasonably deny a charitable person those good feelings that come with doing the right thing.

But there is another kind of charitable giving, the kind that is undertaken solely for the benefit of the giver, to enhance the giver's public image, to do damage control for someone whose public image is in need of repair, or to open doors to the giver that might otherwise be closed. Coined "conspicuous giving" by some researchers this giving is done with a nod to the recipients -- but the focus is on the giver who is looking for a payoff, a quid pro quo.

It may also be an example of someone trying to sneak into the sheep pen not by way of the gate but via what might be called the "VIP special entrance."

John's gospel warns us to not be taken in by such shallow and insincere tactics. Keep your eye on the front gate, he says. That's where the true shepherd, the one we are called to follow, will enter our lives. His approach will be simple and direct and up-front. There's nothing subtle or sneaky about it. It comes head-on.

If we want to be able to discern the voice of our shepherd from all the other voices we hear out there – in the arena of politics, on radio, in the editorial pages of the newspaper, on cable TV, in pulpits and barbershops and social media -- then we need to be fine-tuning our ear to the perfect pitch by way of a close and personal relationship with the shepherd. So you see we need to spend time with him -- lots of time.

We need to pay attention to his voice as it comes to us in those “red letters” that are printed in our Bibles.

We need to go to him in prayer and study, worship and service and enter into the relationship.

On this Mother’s day this is a significant image for us. Every child knows his or her mother’s voice. We first heard our mother’s voice while still in the womb when the relationship first began and her voice continued to speak and guide us and a special bond developed. And so it is that years after my mother’s death I can still hear her voice speaking and guiding me because the bond of that relationship is solid.

And so, when that sweet, lyrical voice comes to us with its perfect pitch, may we will hear it and recognize it and follow it. Amen.