

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 4/13/08
Scripture: John 10:1-10

“That Bothersome Voice of the Shepherd”

“[The good shepherd] 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.”
--John 10:1-10

A bothersome voice. The ones that tell us not just what we want to hear but also what we need to hear.

“Mr. Hudson—I’d like to see you in my office after class today, that is, if you have a moment.” This was a public summons, a voice that I certainly did not want to hear in my New Testament class at Boston University School of Theology, on an April morning twenty-one years ago. Professor J. Paul Sampley’s invitation for a private consultation came after I responded with what I thought was a rather creative, if not correct answer to one of his typically probing and sharp biblical questions. Granted—I hadn’t read the assignment he called upon me to analyze but...well I thought I’d done a pretty good job of weaving a pithy and unique argument, even it lacked substance. He thought otherwise and so entering his office that day I prepared to defend myself.

“Mr. Hudson,” he began. “You’re a smart guy and you think very well and very fast on your feet.” “Why thank you,” I answered confidently. “But your answer today showed me that you still aren’t taking seriously either my class or your career as a pastor, at least not yet.” I withered and grew defensive under his critical voice. “When you go out into the parish people will be depending upon you to be fully prepared and professional and unlike this morning if you try to fudge it or get away with that kind of bologna, it won’t wash.” I blushed, now angry. “You’ve got a lot of potential to be an excellent minister, John. But first, you’ve got to grow up. Never come to my class unprepared again. Good day.”

I mumbled a “Thank you Professor” and stumbled out of his office, stung by his confrontative but all too true analysis of me. His voice cut me but it also changed me and from that day forward I became a much better student. He became one of my favorite teachers and on graduation day, Professor Sampley placed my Masters of Divinity hood over my robe. All because in a caring but brutally honest voice he told me not merely what I wanted to hear but also what I needed to hear.

In a bothersome voice. Offering difficult, but true criticism, calling me to be the best I could be, calling me out, calling me up, to a higher standard, a better way. If you reflect a bit this morning I’ll bet you can recall the bothersome voices of certain folks in your life who have called you out like Professor Sampley, who have challenged you not just with compliments but also with critiques, not just with fawning adoration but also with honest opinions, who make us better people by pushing us, getting us back in line, calling us to different way of life or thought or action. What they say to us at times is hard to

hear but so important to listen to and to heed. Bothersome voices: teachers who accepted nothing but excellent work. Parents who were tough but fair. Mentors who saw something in us that we failed to see in ourselves. Bosses who sent back our work and said, "You can do better." Loved ones, spouses, friends who lovingly point out the faults we can't see but need to see. Tough love. Bothersome voices. Can you hear them?

Today's scripture offers us a beautiful and traditional image: Jesus our good shepherd, the one who watches over us, his flock, a teacher who calls us each by our names, calls us unto him, back to him and a Christian way of life. We know that voice. It's called to us in the worst of times. It reminds us we are loved. I love that voice, I love the good shepherd.

But: what of the times the voice of that shepherd is bothersome, or sharp, or tough, or prophetic, or confrontational even, in God's hopes for me, for you, for our church, the world, in light of God's truth? I mean all of us want to hear the good shepherd say, "Come unto me all ye that are weary and I will give you rest" but: are we also then willing, able to hear the shepherd's voice when he calls unto us with harder demands, or in tougher tones, or in a voice that may be calling us to change or grow or turn back in ways we find too darn bothersome?

Some of you know I spend a good deal of time each week with my almost three-year old Goddaughter in Cambridge, whom I baby-sit for on a regular basis. Lately she's gotten into the very bad habit of whipping open the front door of her house and trying to run outside. To her it is a playful game. To me, to any of us, that's a dangerous game and so last week when she tried to pull that one on me I gently took her by the wrist before she could take off, looked into her eyes and in a firm voice said the dreaded word that all kids hate to hear: "NO!" So, of course, she burst into tears, unused to her playful God dad setting such a limit, making such a demand. That was a voice she did not want to hear but: she needed to hear it.

My friends: a full blown faith and relationship with Jesus means we'll go to the shepherd, listen to him, seek him out: not just for comfort but also for loving critique too. Not just to be confirmed in whom we are, but also to be transformed into someone we may not think we are ready to be. God calls us: as disciples, a Pilgrim Church, Creation in a bothersome voice sometimes: to leave our comfort zones, to become and not just be, to grow and not merely stagnate, to change and be challenged, to discard old stereotypes, sinful impulses, hurtful opinions. When God calls us we need to hear not just, "Humanity: where are you? I miss you!" but also, "Hey, humanity! Where are you? We need to talk!"

Do you hear that? Are we courageous enough to hear God not just when we want to but also when we need to? In a bothersome voice of personal conscience: "Do you really want to cheat on that test?" A bothersome voice of duty: "What will it take to spend more time with the family and less time at work?" A bothersome voice of integrity: "Are you really going to play with those numbers on your tax return again this year?" A bothersome voice of generosity: "How about giving some more money to charity and

keeping a little less for yourself?” We all know that voice. It nags, it reminds, it pops up at the times we need to choose between right and wrong, doing the easy thing or doing the right thing. So: what is the bothersome voice of God talking to you about these days? We hear it—but do we heed it?

That bothersome voice of the shepherd: to you and me: and to the world. I actually came to this metaphor of God’s bothersome voice, when marking a week ago last Friday, the 40th anniversary of the assassination of The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. Talk about a bothersome, annoying, prophetic, Godly voice, a voice so radical and so true that it was silenced by the bullet of an assassin’s gun. Four decades later it’s easy to forget that in 1968 many saw King, as FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s did: “The most hated man in America.” I remember King because he was one of those rare public leaders who loved America so much, he told America not just what we wanted to hear but also what we needed to hear too.

About the sin of racism that has haunted our land for nearly 400 years. He named this truth and many others, hard truths, truths we needed and still need to face as a country, as a people. He called us to live up to our best hopes and selves, not just our worst nightmares and social sins. He imagined the dream of a land where my children and your children and his children “would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” He reminded us that “Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer the command to love one’s enemy is an absolutely necessity to our survival.” His was the bothersome voice of a good shepherd, a voice we still need to hear forty years later, where so much has changed and so much is still the same.

The bothersome voice of the shepherd, calling us back, calling us ahead, and telling us: not just what we want to hear but also what we need to hear too. The shepherd is calling. Will we hear him? I pray, “yes!” Let all the people say, “Amen!”