

VOICES

John 10.1-18 (abridged)

May 7, 2017, Diverse Harmony Sunday

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COMMUNION MEDITATION

It's great to have Diverse Harmony and Spectrum with us this morning.

And did you catch the words of this last song?

I dreamed a dream in time gone by ...

But the tigers come at night

With their voices soft as thunder

As they tear your hopes apart

As they turn your dreams to shame.

Now those are some haunting lyrics.

But they aren't that far from the Bible text assigned for today from John 10. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says, "those who came before me were thieves and marauders [tigers] who come to steal and destroy."

But the sheep have this special power, Jesus says, to recognize the *voice* of the shepherd:

The sheep know the shepherd's voice;

and the shepherd calls them by name

and leads them out ...

and the sheep follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice.

They won't follow strangers –

in fact, they will flee from them

because they do not recognize the voice of those who would ...

steal and destroy ...

or, as the song says, tear your hopes apart

and turn your dreams not just into disappointment but into shame.

The Bible has a lot to say about sheep and shepherds. The most famous Psalm in the Bible begins: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want for anything.”

The prophet Ezekiel says that the people have had a lot of bad shepherds to lead them. And so he says:

These are the words of the Lord God:

Now I myself will ask after the sheep

and go in search of them ... and rescue them,

no matter where they were scattered in dark and cloudy days ...

I will search for the lost,

recover the straggler,

bandage the hurt,

strengthen the sick.

[NEB, Ezek.34.11-16]

According to Robin Meyers, the “good shepherd” was one of the earliest symbols used by the church to express its dream of a world redeemed by love.

And regardless of the popular perception that sheep are dumb, our resident shepherd, Donna Ward, who had a ranch in Oregon with 150 sheep, says that they have their own intelligence.

And if Jesus is right, that they have this innate ability to recognize the voice of the one who would care for them and to flee from the voice that would destroy them, they have a power I sometimes don't have.

For example, if nine people leave a service some Sunday morning and tell me that the sermon was great, and one person leaves the service and says the sermon was a real stinker, whose voice do you think I will hear?

And it's more complicated than that because what if the nine people are just flattering me and that one person is actually telling the truth?

How do you figure out the voices that really are important for your well-being – even if they have to tell you hard things – and how do you identify the ones that might tell you the things you want to hear but might tear your hopes apart and turn your dreams into shame?

How do you know?

John says:

*The sheep know the shepherd's voice;
and the shepherd calls them by name
and leads them ...*

So maybe part of discerning the voices in our lives has to do with where those voices lead us.

Back to my example: If the nine voices who said my sermon was great leads to a greater confidence and more freedom to say the things I need to say, it would be good to follow those voices.

If, on the other hand, those voices lead me down the road of becoming arrogant and feeling like I don't need to listen to anybody, then I should probably be careful not to give those voices too much space in my head – because that leads to a place I don't want to go.

Of if the one voice that told me my sermon stunk leads me to become a better preacher, I should probably pay attention.

But if it leads me to paralyzing self-doubt and defensiveness, then I need to learn to just walk away.

And this is timely right now because all around us there are voices that claim to know what we should do about our lives, our country, healthcare, and the world. It's confusing.

But when I hear those voices, I've started asking: Where would this voice lead us?

Would it lead us to greater understanding?

Would it lead us to deeper connections?

Would it lead us to more hope and less shame?

Would it lead us, as Ezekiel says, to search for the lost, to recover the straggler, to bandage the hurt, and to strengthen the sick?

Where are the voices in our lives leading us? It's not just about the voices we hear. It's about where they are leading us.

And I am glad our friends from Diverse Harmony are with us this morning because I have a hero, a Baptist preacher in New York City from about 80 years ago who was a friend of Dr. King. His name was Harry Emerson Fosdick and he wrote a prayer about the leadership of the next generation:

Look down, we beseech you, upon our schools and colleges, and upon the youths who study there. For the frankness and candor, the sincerity and fearlessness of the coming generation, we thank you. We ask that you will minister through them to the leadership of the world. Save them from triviality in such a day as this. O God, listen to our cry for leadership. Your people are often like sheep without a shepherd. We pray for guidance and for men and women from this new generation who will have courage, vision, intelligence, and fearlessness to lead the way into nobler days.

So this time with us here isn't just about Diverse Harmony performing for us. It's an answer to prayer. These are voices that are leading us to the hope of a new kind of world where people are accepted and empowered and loved.

When Patrick was talking about our wedding all those years ago, I was thinking about all those voices of shame I lived with growing up – voices that tore up any prospect I had for love. And I can tell you exactly where those voices led. And it wasn't pretty.

But there were other voices that came along. Sometimes I was suspicious of them because they sounded too good to be true. But I can tell you exactly where those voices led too.

They led right here.

And it turns out that the voices here this morning are leading us to the “greatest love of all.”

And today, if you hear that voice, for God’s sake, do not harden your hearts.

[Diverse Harmon sings: “The Greatest love of all”]

NOTES

Diverse Harmony is the country’s first queer-straight alliance youth chorus. Their rehearsal home is at Seattle First Baptist Church. Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus* (Jossey-Bass, 2012), pp.61-62. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Book of Public Prayers* (Harper & Brothers, 1959).