

Date: April 17, 2016
 Scriptures: Psalm 100; John 10:22-30
 Title: Hearing and Following

Do you remember
 the Verizon commercials of a few years ago?
 My favorite is the one that shows a man
 peeking out of a pothole,
 wading through the swamp,
 working in an office,
 standing first in a cornfield,
 and then in deepest Africa,
 and finally the far reaches of Alaska.

In each location, the man asks,
 "Can you hear me now?"
 At its end, it's not the man who asks the question,
 but President Obama.
 I can't remember ever seeing
 a president of the United States in a commercial,
 but there President Obama is asking,
 "Can you hear me now?"

Hearing is a crucial component
 of Jesus' message in today's gospel reading.
 So, I ask you, **"What do you hear in it?"**
 This is not a throw away question.
 I would really like to know what you hear.

When I asked a Jewish friend what she heard,
 she said,
 "He was not the Messiah to those Jews;
 however there was some small band
 that did start to listen to him
 and hear his teachings
 and cling to them.
 I think it is these people,
 whom he refers to as his "sheep".
 He says here "his sheep,"

assuming the role of guiding figure,
 as in shepherd to a flock.
 These "sheep" listen to him, follow him,
 and he promises them in return, eternal life.
 Eternal life is quite a compelling promise.
 No one else will take his place with these folks.
 No one can snatch them out of his hand."

A male friend, said,

"Back then, Messiah was a loaded word,
 a word that carried all sorts of baggage
 and could be dangerous.
 So he unpacked the meaning for his listeners.
 He directed them
 to consider the works he had done
 and then challenged them
 to draw their own conclusions.
 By doing this, Jesus acknowledged he was the Messiah
 without using the word directly."
 This friend also said he heard Jesus saying
 that only he could give eternal life,
 that he was the only way to God.

What do you hear in this passage?

I ask, because what you hear influences
 what you believe,
 and how you live in the world.

It influences what you do and say
 at home and at work,
 visiting with friends,
 driving on MoPac,
 pushing a cart through the grocery store.

It influences every moment of every day,
 waking and sleeping.

There are passages in the Christian Testament,
 which have led some
 to marginalize, demean, and malign
 other people and faith traditions.

Several of these passages occur in John.

Whenever we read scripture,

it is vitally important for us to be aware of
the context in which it was written.

In the years immediately following Jesus' death,

many Jewish Christians maintained
their Jewish faith and traditions

and also worshipped Christ on Sunday.

These Jewish Christians were seen as a sect within Judaism.

Since Rome recognized Judaism as a legitimate religion,
early Christianity was also seen as legitimate.

Christians and Jews lived together

in relative peace and harmony until 70 CE.

In that year, Roman troops entered Jerusalem

and destroyed the Temple.

The Temple's destruction threw Judaism into disarray,

which over time led to the fracturing of the relationship

between the Jewish religious leaders and Jewish Christians.

Eventually, Jewish Christians were

cast out of the synagogue.

When this happened, they lost their standing

as a legitimate religion with Rome.

What we hear in John's gospel today is

the hurt and the pain and the anger and the grief

of a people unmoored from their spiritual foundation,

cut off from important relationships,

powerless against a more powerful religious group.

What we hear in John's gospel is an argument

between one group of Jews with another group of Jews

about correct beliefs.

We Presbyterians know what it is

to argue with our brothers and sisters about beliefs,

don't we?

Such arguments can make us

see red and cut us to the quick.

One of the ways in which the Christian Testament

has been used against other people and faith traditions
 centers around the idea
 that Jesus is the only way to God.

We hear that in today's reading when Jesus says,
 "I give them eternal life and they will never perish."

He says it more explicitly in John 14:6,
 "No one comes to the Father, except through me"

This way of thinking is called exclusivism.

Christian exclusivism asserts
 that Jesus is one and only way to God.

In response to this,
 my Jewish friend said,

"I think the Apostles were trying
 to make it an exclusive religion
 to differentiate it
 from the regular Jewish religion at the time.

Think what a powerful message
 Jesus was giving people,
 who would believe in Him
 and what he was telling them.

Eternal Life.

As a Guarantee.

If they believed in Him.

That is something . . . extraordinarily attractive
 to people,
 who believed this could happen through him."

Jesus' promise of eternal life is
 a powerful, life-giving message for those,
 who believe Jesus is the way.

But, if we insist
 that Jesus or any one way is the only way,
 the exclusive way to God,
 we can too easily fall prey to the temptation
 to use our faith
 to marginalize, demean, and malign,
 other people and faith traditions.

We see that happening all across the world today
 not just among Christians

but also people of other faith traditions.
 Episcopal priest and college professor,
 Barbara Brown Taylor, once said,
 "I believe Jesus is the only way,
 and that his way teaches us
 to live in peace with other ways....
 Ask me about God's opinion of other ways,
 and I will refer you to God."

I believe that God works
 through history and cultures and people
 and that God understands how to best reach people,
 how best to help us understand
 that we are not the center of the universe .

I believe God uses Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism,
 Islam, Christianity, and the other religions of the world
 to help us understand
 that how we live in this world is
 vitally important for all of us and all Creation.

I believe that Jesus is the way,
 the way for me.
 He is the one, who renewed and transformed my life.
 He is the one, who showed me
 that God is love
 and set me on a journey
 to live God's love out in the world.

He is the one, who taught me love never fails.
 He is the one,
 who removes scales from my eyes
 and circumcises my heart
 and helps me hear his voice.

My life is not always easy;
 it's not always tied up neatly with a bow;
 and it's certainly not
 without its questions and doubts and uncertainties
 or its hurts and disappointments and deep griefs.

Though I try to live as a faithful follower,
 I stumble and fall,
 hang back and turn away

more than I like to admit.
 Yet, I know if I look at the cross,
 I will be reminded of my true north,
 God's love and Christ's love,
 and be strengthened for my journey.
 I believe the way to God is through love,
 and love never allows us
 to marginalize, demean, or malign any of God's children.

This is what I believe.
 You may believe something totally different.
 For me, that's OK,
 because God works differently in each of our lives.
 AND, we can still be friends.
 In fact, we must be friends,
 for our relationship testifies to the power of love.
 Love's power to bind up wounds
 and heal brokenness
 and free us from the tyranny of the self.

While having coffee with Cecilia recently,
 She told me a story about a young man,
 who attends mass daily.
 He is a lawyer in Brazil
 studying to be appointed as a judge.
 There, judges are appointed on the basis of test scores.
 Though unmarried,
 he is hoping to marry someone
 for whom faith is equally important.
 Recently while at mass, he saw a young woman
 to whom he was attracted.
 The next day,
 he saw her again
 and then again the day after that.
 On the third day, after she got up
 to go to the front to take communion,
 he got and placed a note in her seat.
 "I have seen you at mass the past several days
 and would like to take you for coffee.

If you would like to go, please call”

That's how I think God works.

God leaves us love notes,
notes that call us to God's self.

The note may be in the form
of the Jewish Scriptures or the Christian Testament
or the Koran or Bhagavad Gita
or the Theravada,
or the Book of Certitude
or the Book of Mormon.

These notes are for
life not death
community not alienation,
hope not despair.

They are notes that call us
to pay attention to the here and now,
to what we are saying and doing
to how we treat others and this good creation.

When we do,
we discover that eternal life is not out there
somewhere in the distant future
but here and now
and for us all,
and we –
we pick up our cross and gladly follow.
Amen.