

So apparently, I should be thanking my Dad for providing back to back weeks of sermon inspiration, but ya know, you take the motivation when it comes, right? Though this week is not about his knowledge, or lack thereof of Michigan geography, but rather...about his whistling skills. Uh huh, whistling, very specific whistling actually, the kind of whistling that calls dogs home. It's a rather odd skill set, I'll admit, but it's one of my dad's best, though the memory of it for me comes laced with a very odd undercurrent of anxiety, because if my Dad started whistling then, it was sometimes, *sometimes* time to worry a little bit.

You see, since I grew up in the country, there was no such thing as having our dogs in the house. They were ragtag, rough and tumble country dogs who lived outside in their pen which adjoined our shed, and they would run around and play with us when we let them out, but they would also just generally like to *run around* when we let them out, which is where my well worn memory of childhood worry comes in. The first dog that I ever remember owning was Bandit. He was this little mutt of a dog, named by my sisters because he had these little, black raccoon circles around his eyes that made him look like he was wearing a robber's mask. Now, for as much as Bandit loved us all, he was my dad's dog, full stop, and let me tell you, my dad gave that dog *leeway* with the wandering. My dad would let him out

while he was out working in the backyard and sometimes Bandit would stay put, just following along with my dad or playing with all of us, but more often than not, that got old really quick and Bandit was off to the races into the cornfields behind my house.

This did not phase my dad one bit. To the rest of it, it was panic inducing. How would he know how to get home? What if he got turned around and lost? What if someone found him and didn't bring him home? What if he just decided being a free range dog was the better option? None of those questions seemed to bug my dad, because he always knew, without fail, he had surefire way of getting Bandit home. You could always tell when my Dad had crossed the threshold of having let the dog wander too long. In my childhood brain, it felt like hours when in reality it was probably like twenty minutes, but there was always a moment, when my dad decided it was no longer time to let Bandit decide when he was coming home, it was time to bring him home. He would stand on our back porch or on our pool deck and let out the most ear-splitting whistle you could ever imagine. Usually, all it took was one. One whistle and after a few minutes you'd here the inevitable rustle of corn and there would come Bandit bounding out of the field and right up to my Dad, like "HI! I'm home! That was amazing!!" There were times though...times when the first whistle

didn't work, and that was always when I knew my Dad was slightly nervous. If he had to do it a second time...it came with a twinge of, oh...what if this is the time it doesn't work? And yet...it always did. Bandit always came home when he was called; no matter what he recognized my Dad's whistle.

That's all I could think of as I read today's gospel, this twinge of childhood memory that it didn't matter how far afield he was, Bandit always came home, because my Dad was the one who called him there. I don't think he would have listened to any of the rest of us, regardless of whether or not we could whistle. There was something about it being my Dad's specific whistle that made him listen, and so like the sheep that Jesus is talking about, Bandit wouldn't follow a stranger's voice, only the one he knew, only the one that would unequivocally call him home.

It's a bit weird, this gospel actually, because we tend to think of it as warm and fuzzy Jesus, with images from old Sunday school classrooms in our heads of Jesus as the loving Good Shepherd, cradling his sheep in his arms, but this is actually more akin to feisty Jesus, calling the Pharisees out for their really, really poor shepherding skills, for their inability to be the right voice, the right whistle to beckon God's people home. Because you see what happens right before this little speech of Jesus' is that he has just healed the man born blind, which we heard during Lent. The Pharisees have

just wasted all of this time trying to figure out issues of sinfulness and Jesus' worthiness in the eyes of God, rather than acknowledging that even though he couldn't *see* Jesus, the man born blind could *hear* Jesus when he called him to wash in the pool of Siloam and be healed, that the power of Jesus' voice brought healing and restoration of abundant life back to this man. The Pharisees are only interested in being the dissenting voice that proclaims only *they* know the way to God, and everything else is false. The same thing is going to happen right after this speech of Jesus'. Jesus' voice is literally going to call Lazarus out of the bondage of death, break through the walls of a closed up tomb, and bring life back into Lazarus' body, and the Pharisees are only going to see that as dangerous, as a reason to kill Jesus, rather than recognizing that there is something about Jesus' voice that is calling God's people home.

They are so wrapped up in what they think is right, what they think is the correct path, in making their voices rise above the din of the Jesus fervor that is surrounding them that they can't see, they can't recognize, they can't hear that Jesus' voice is the one they should be heeding. Jesus is trying to say to them here that they can sound off and pontificate and deride all they want, but God's children are always going to heed the call of their shepherd. That is the voice they know. That is the voice they're going to listen to. It

doesn't matter how loud the Pharisees shout, the people of Israel have recognized the voice of Jesus as the voice of their Savior and they're going to listen to it and follow it wherever it calls them. No matter what. The people are done listening to voices that bring them only strife and hardship and frustration. They've heard the voice of compassion and hope and healing and abundant life and they're going to follow it home.

But for as much as I want to say to this amen, Jesus! Yes, absolutely that is what your people hear and do...I'm actually not so sure that's the case. Jesus says to the Pharisees that his sheep will not follow the voice of a stranger, and in the back of mind, I can't help thinking, eh, but won't we though? Don't we in fact do that...all the time? Someone in Bible study this week said that there's a difference between hearing and listening, and I think they're right. We're really good at *hearing* Jesus' voice, but listening to it? That's a whole other issue...

For as often as we *hear* the promise that we are God's beloved children, beautifully precious and beloved in God's sight, cherished, *loved beyond measure*, we are far more inclined to *listen* to all of the voices of this world that would tell us that we are nowhere near good enough, that we're messed up, broken people who are nothing but damaged goods in need of *fixing*. We can hear all we want that God loves us, but the next minute

we're listening to every single word that society, culture, maybe even our families or friends tell us about how we just aren't quite good enough to be truly loved just yet. We'll get there, but we have a lot of work to do first. We will listen to the voice of strangers when they tell us we aren't loved.

For as often as we *hear* the call of Jesus to be people of compassion and generosity, people who strive for justice and equality, we are far more inclined to *listen* to all of the voices that tell us that it is far better, far safer to operate in this world through the lens of judgment and individuality, through hoarding and a solid mentality of everyone should pull themselves up by their bootstraps and take care of themselves. We can hear until our ears are numb Jesus calling us to care for our neighbors, but we are far more interested in listening to the world tell us that poverty and homelessness and prejudice are issues for *other* people to deal with, that they aren't something we should care about, that issues of social justice are ridiculous and unnecessary and people need to work out their lives for themselves because their decisions got them there. We will listen to the voice of strangers when they tell us that caring for others is a weakness, not a strength.

For as often as we *hear* Jesus calling us to be people who see each other through the eyes of God, who care for each other and love each other the way God loves us, we are far more inclined to *listen* to the voices that

tell us that there are just certain things that aren't acceptable in the lives, in the identities of others. Voices that proclaim that the road of prejudice and judgment is the actual road of God, and we let those voices cry out that racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and every other prejudice we can think of are ok, justified even, especially if we want to agree with them. We hear that God loves us all unconditionally but we will listen to the voice of strangers when they say all the things we want to hear to justify our hate.

So for as much as the Pharisees needed this call out, maybe we do too. Jesus proclaims that we, his sheep, will not listen to a stranger's voice, that we will not be called to some false home and sense of security by voices that seem to speak peace but only offer us harm. And maybe, it's time that we stop just hearing those words, but *listening* to them, listening to what Jesus is saying and actually following those words. Words that call us to a life abundant and beloved, not just for ourselves, but for all of our siblings, a life characterized by hope and grace, not bitterness and fear. Words that beckon us to see the world through Jesus' eyes and that call us to mold it in the shape of his compassion and love. Words that beckon us home to safety and peace, not anguish and worry. People of God, there is a whistle echoing in the world, calling us beloved, calling us disciples but will we hear it, not just hear it, but listen for it, and let it call us home? **AMEN!!!**