

So one thing you need to know about my mom and my Aunt Ann is that, in the right light, they look almost identical. There is zero question that they are sisters whatsoever. A great deal of the time, they have a very similar hair cut, my mom's just tends to be a bit curlier in the back, their hair color is exactly the same with flashes of red highlights coming out, they both wear glasses, and are pretty much the same height. If you look too quickly, it's easy to mistake one for the other, a lesson that our sweet, little Sebastian learned the hard way, or at least the hard way for a baby.

I don't remember how old he was, but young enough to still be sufficiently in the toddler stage, getting his little legs under him to wander around everywhere. We were all home for Christmas and my aunt and her family had come over to visit. There were so many people around, which for a tiny tot can be overwhelming. At one point, Bash tore across the room, his legs carrying him as fast as he could, with a huge smile on his face, and ran right into my aunt's arms. I mean he was ready for some snuggles, arms outstretched, running forward, like lady you are gonna catch me and you are gonna hug me so hard! Well, my aunt scooped him up simultaneously astonished and ecstatic that he came to her. So she gave him a little squeeze, and then Bash sat up in her arms and you could see the moment it happened. Panic immediately came into his eyes like what have I done?! This isn't

grandma! Who is this lady?! Get me out of here!!! The waterworks followed quickly on the heels of that look and my aunt put him down and directed him towards my mom, where he happily and contentedly found his way into grandma's arms, the ones he was looking for to begin with.

The poor kid didn't know what hit him and he was so happy to finally be where he knew he was safe, all the while we all kind of chuckled, because frankly, we'd all been there before. Each of us, whether my sisters or my cousins, have walked up behind the one we thought was our mom and gave them a hug, only to realize that we have got the wrong sister. When you're older, it's not as panic inducing as when you're a toddler, obviously, but we each knew that feeling, that feeling of...oh...I thought I was going for the right person and I have been sorely mistaken...hooooow do I remedy this and where is the person I was meant to be hugging? We've all probably had similar experiences, either in person or maybe over the phone, one family member sounding like another and you can't quite get your bearings to figure out whose voice you're hearing. It's disconcerting. You think you know what you're seeing, what you're hearing, and when you find out you're wrong, it can spin you around a little bit, desperately searching for who you were looking for in the first place.

It seems that this is a phenomenon that isn't just relegated to our modern sensibilities, but is one that people across time have been able to relate to, and not just people, but apparently *sheep* get it too! Because that's exactly what Jesus is getting at here in our gospel this morning. I've said it before and I'll say it again, Jesus is a man who knows his audience and knows his culture, he knows how to bring the kingdom of God, his Messiahship, the life he is calling people to into their current context, rather than just waxing theological and hoping people get it, and today's gospel is the perfect example of that.

Jesus knows that he is talking to a crowd of people who are acutely aware of the farming, shepherding, sheepy lifestyle. They know what it is to attempt to herd sheep and keep them safe in an environment that was sometimes brutally unforgiving, so when Jesus decides to talk to the crowds about who he is for them, he leans into the shepherd talk. Now, there's a lot of stuff in here about gates and thieves and it can honestly get a little confusing even in the midst of something as simple as sheep talk, but the heart of the message that Jesus wants the crowds to understand is that he is their shepherd, he is who they are called to follow. He promises them exactly what a shepherd promises their sheep, protection, provision, and as much as is possible life that is abundant and safe, in pastures that are green.

Yet, there's a little caveat to this whole, I am the shepherd, you are the sheep thing. And it has to do with Jesus' voice.

Jesus tells the people that yes, he is the shepherd, they are the sheep, they are called to follow him. However, he also says that his sheep know his voice. The sheep follow the shepherd because that is the voice that they know, they won't follow the voice of a stranger, in fact they will *run* from strangers because they don't know their voices. It sounds really simple and kind of basic. Sheep know their shepherd, they learn his voice, they follow him. If someone else tries to lead them astray, it's going to be fruitless because they don't know that person or recognize their voice. Easy peasy. Jesus is the shepherd we follow. Jesus calls us by name. We know Jesus' voice and follow where we're called. Done. The gospel of Our Lord. Amen and Amen. Except...we know this isn't the case.

What Jesus describes here is...the ideal. This is the world he has come to create, a world in which all of God's children, all of God's sheep know the voice of God and know how and where to follow it. They don't go astray, they remain focused, and the flock stays intact, all happy go lucky sheep. Yet, that's not the world we have created for ourselves. Not even remotely close to it. It's true, it should be possible. We should know Jesus' voice, we should know what we're called to, but just like Sebastian made a

beeline for my aunt because he thought she was my mom, we run towards any number of things we think are Jesus or things that we make sound like Jesus because we *want* to run towards them instead of him.

We are far, far, far more interested in the things that the world has to say than the things Jesus has to say, and more often than not we try really hard to make Jesus conform to the world we live in, then daring to live as Jesus calls us in a world that is messy and hard. Where Jesus says, they will know you are my disciples by loving with the same love I have loved you with, we say, yeah, no, because there are a lot of people we would rather not love. And so we turn the voice of Jesus into the voice of politicians, talking heads, and the voices of our hearts that point to all the people that we should hate. And I know, we say that and all of us think, we don't *hate* anyone, but how many people do you avoid or criticize or judge? How many people do you look at and make a hundred assumptions in a few seconds and decide they aren't someone you want to be around? How many people do we instinctually step back from as opposed to step towards because they're different or we think they're strange or we just don't get them and we don't want to try? Jesus says we won't follow the voice of a stranger, but we will follow plenty of voices that say, these are the people you shouldn't love.

Where Jesus says, as you did to the least of these, you did to me, we say, yeah, but ya know, Jesus there are a lot of different circumstances here. Those people who are in prison, well they deserve to be there and if they get treated a little less than decently, it's what they had coming to them. Those people who are hungry or naked, well, they may have gotten there by bad choices they made and it's not up to us to pull their bootstraps up for them. Those people who are sick, well, ya know, my health is my health and if I decide to do something that might harm another person's health, eh, that's not really my issue is it. Jesus says we won't listen to the voice of a stranger, but we will follow plenty of voices that tell us why we shouldn't seek to care for those in need because the world just doesn't work that way.

Where Jesus says, we cannot worship God and wealth, we say, welllll, we earned this money and if it's what we have then we can do what we want with it, even if it isn't always the best. We live in a world that does nothing but serve it's wealth. We bow at the feet of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk and countless others and never stop to ask ourselves how exactly our actions tie into the life of stewardship Jesus calls us to. We think, I give my offering and so nothing else matters. We don't have to worry about the awful working conditions of our siblings if it means we get something a little cheaper. We can complain about the speed of the mail if our next day

shipping becomes two days. But clearly that has nothing to do with our faith. We won't follow the voice of a stranger, but we will follow the voice of our money because what would we do without it?

It's hard to not actually laugh when Jesus says to the crowds that his sheep won't follow the voice of a stranger, because we know how unbelievably false that is in our own lives. We will...everyday we follow the voices of strangers that pull us away from the life of faith that Jesus calls us to. They call us to worship idols that look nothing like God, but convince us that they are more important. We come here once a week and we hear Jesus' voice and in this little bit of time that voice is loud and profound and then we go out into the world and it is silenced far too quickly. We say yeah Jesus said, but this is really what I want to hear so I'm going to go this way.

Life with Jesus isn't a pick and choose, a Burger King have it your way kind of decision. Life with Jesus is following the voice of our Good Shepherd who calls us to unconditional, unmitigated love of neighbor, stewardship of all of our gifts, and care for the marginalized, the oppressed, the forgotten. The world assails us with multiple voices trying to persuade us to ignore what Jesus says. It stands there with arms wide open and says, I look enough like Jesus come to me. Now it's up to us to figure out if those are the arms we want to run to or if we will choose Jesus. **AMEN!!!**