

*“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

I remember running down a hillside in the pasture behind our house. Close behind was a lamb, ready to bump me with his head. It was a moment of pure joy - I was frolicking with Skippy.

Skippy had come to us as a day old lamb, weak and wobbly. A neighbor had a flock of sheep - for some reason a mother sheep had rejected her own lamb – refusing to let him suck. My father volunteered his children to care for this orphan. Every day my sisters, my brother and I argued about who would get to hold the bottle and feed Skippy. In time Skippy grew and no longer needed to be fed with the bottle. Skippy was placed out in the pasture, where grass was abundant. When we called Skippy came running, Skippy knew our voices.

By the time fall came Skippy was no longer a little lamb but was now ready for market. For my father it was obvious what should happen next – he was taking Skippy to the butcher – our special friend was with us no more. I remember tears, and tears, and tears.

Years later when I was in Junior High and High School we raised our own sheep on our farm. Never again did we give one a name – adopt one as a pet. Sheep and lambs were there simply to make us money – we sold the wool – each fall we sent lambs to market to be butchered. We cared for all the sheep and lambs, but we did not care about them the way we had cared about Skippy.

Jesus said, “The sheep hear the shepherd’s voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has bought out all his own, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

Jesus knows his own sheep by name. You are not just a number with Jesus, a lamb being raised for profit. Jesus knows you and wants you to know his voice – to follow because you know his voice.

It would be easy if you and I could recognize Jesus voice the way we recognize the voice of family and friend on the phone. I call some of you and before I can say who I am I hear the greeting, “Hi pastor.” Makes me feel good.

But what does Jesus voice sound like? Is it a deep bass voice, a loud commanding voice? A soft gentle voice? Skippy knew our voices because he had grown up with us. The sheep we raised in later years never came running at the sound of my voice. So how do we learn to recognize the voice of Jesus?

When we are young the voice of Jesus may seem identical with the voice of a parent, father or mother, or the voice of a teacher, or pastor. As we grow up we may realize that while Jesus speaks through them that Jesus is not the same as any one of them. As we live among God’s people we learn to hear the voice of Jesus through the scriptures, in the word that is proclaimed, in the meal that is shared. How is it that you come to recognize someone’s voice on the phone? Hearing it over and over.

That is why the promises that will be made by those being confirmed begin with: to live among God’s faith-filled people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper. Being one of Jesus own is not about knowing some facts about Jesus – believing some ideas about Jesus. Being one of Jesus sheep means living among his people, within his body.

Jesus also said that those who know his voice follow him. Because Jesus proclaimed the good news of God in word and deed, those being confirmed will promise to do the same. Everywhere Jesus went Jesus was that good news of God in loving and forgiving and helping. He gave his life for the sheep – the greatest act of love. And God raised him from death so that all of Jesus lambs might follow him into life that is eternal.

Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

Abercrombie, Hollister, Apple, Lexus, all promise life that will be abundant. But in the end they just want your money. For a moment they bring joy but the joy will not be enduring.

Jesus has not called your name to take something from you but that you might have a life filled with a joy that will endure, life that is abundant. The path to this abundant life is the one Jesus walked, a life of faith in God and of sharing the love of God.

The good shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. He goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Amen.