

Which Voice?

1 John 4:1-6 and John 10:1-6

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1 John 4:1-6

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus[a] is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. ⁴Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Pre-John Comments

The Word for Children did a great job acting out 1 John 4:1-6. Who picks a letter from the back half of the New Testament to act out in a children's sermon? But they did it, and did a great job! You caught the part about making sure about which voice we listen to. There's a voice from the world and the world listens to it, and then there is a voice from God that helps us know the spirit of truth.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of John. Here the evangelist tells us about sheep who hear the shepherd's voice and know that they need to follow.

Second Reading: John 10:1-6

“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.

Some time last spring, I came home from work to find my front door wide open. My first thought? “The cat!!!”

Ahoy—yes, that’s her name, Ahoy—so think about my name, and think about her name...yep, that’s right. Anyway, Ahoy was shivering in fear, deep underneath some shrubs. She refused to come out and I couldn’t get close enough to grab her. For two hours I tried. I brought her favorite treats outside. I brought her toys outside. I even brought her litter box outside.

Then I just sat on the front porch and talked on the phone. As she heard my voice, I saw her slowly making her way out from under the shrubs... She heard my voice and she slowly walking toward the front steps...She heard my voice and she made her way up the stairs and climbed into my lap.

There were an awful lot of other voices calling to her that evening. Ruby the neighbors’ dog saying “Come play with me—I PROMISE I won’t bite you!” and cars squealing out “Don’t worry I would NEVER run over you” and Sophia the ten-year-old belting out Taylor Swift’s “You belong with me.” But Ahoy didn’t get seduced by any of these voices.

Nope—she heard my voice. She knew it. And she came to it. That cat is one wise cat.

Now, I don’t want to say that Ahoy is wiser than I am—although I’m pretty sure that she would. And maybe in this case she’d be right, because the truth is that I’m also surrounded by a lot of voices...but I don’t always follow the right one. There are lots of voices, and some of them are a lot better to follow than other ones...but unlike my cat, I’m often seduced to ones that aren’t so good for me—they drown out the ones that will lead me toward God’s hopes and dreams for me. And even though I’ve only been here two and a half

weeks, if I had to guess, I'd say I'm not the only one in the room who has this problem. Maybe one or two of you struggle with this too.

Now, this isn't news to God. That's why both of our scriptures discuss this very issue—how we get off track, listening to the wrong voices. In our gospel passage from the book of John, the animal of the day is not a cat, but a sheep. Jesus tells his disciples that the sheep hear the gatekeeper's voice—he calls them by name, and he leads them out. He goes on ahead of them, and they know his voice, so they follow. On the other hand, they won't follow the voice of a stranger—they'll run away instead. Sheep, like cats, know the right voices to follow. Jesus tells his disciples this because his disciples, and me, and one or two of you, are often not so sure about which voice is the right voice to follow.

In the passage from First John, there aren't any animals; just dear children. Dear children who are apparently having a hard time figuring out who to follow, too. John tells them first to make sure that they're paying attention to whether or not someone believes that Jesus is really God in the flesh—because if they don't, they're definitely not from God. And wise dear children know which voice to listen to—wise children listen to John and his crowd, because they're with God. And other people listen to those others who don't believe that Jesus is really God in the flesh—and those are definitely not voices that they should listen to.

So to recap: sheep, cats, wise dear children → know which voice to listen to. Other people, Jesus' disciples, me, one or two of you → don't know which voice to listen to.

One way the church has tried to help people like me and the one or two of you who sometimes don't know which voice to listen to is the Book of Confessions. The Book of Confessions is not a collection of all of the worst sins Presby-famous people have committed over the years, unfortunately. It's a collection of statements of faith that the church has adopted to help us interpret the scriptures.

One of them is the Heidelberg Catechism. Anyone want to guess where this was written? You all are so smart! Anyone want to guess when it was written? Right! During the Reformation, in the 1500s. To try to help people in this new branch of the Christian church, the Reformed tradition, understand which voice to listen to. It has a question and answer format.

You heard about the Lenten Devotional during the announcements today. Each of the entries in it has a question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism to help give some more depth to the scripture. The entry that begins today covers the most famous of those questions and answers, #1. It's in your bulletin, right after the sermon as our statement of faith. Skim through it right now.

It says, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" and then begins,

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

We'll read the whole thing after the sermon, but I want to stop right there, now, and imagine what it would mean if a voice saying this were the primary voice that we listened to, in society. Not just the sheep, and the cats, and the wise little children, but if everyone listened first to a voice saying things like this? It matters which voice we listen to.

For instance, what voice had Nikolas Cruz been listening to? He's the 19-year-old who killed 17 at the high school in Parkland, FL, this past week. The reasons why someone would go on a rampage like this are multiple and complex, but press accounts have said that High School was particularly lonely for him. As he looked back on it I can imagine a loud voice seducing him, "you better get back at those girls for thinking you're creepy. Get your revenge. And the guys who think you're garbage? Get some guns and take them down."

But what if that voice got drowned out? What if the loudest voice he heard was Jesus', saying "Nikolas, you're mine. You belong to me. I love you. It

doesn't matter if everyone else thinks you're weird. I love you. I created you. You're beautiful. And you belong to me, in life and in death."

Isolation vs. Belonging. It makes a big difference which voice you listen to.

Around this same issue it makes me wonder which voice so many of us listen to... the voice of the status quo, or Jesus' voice.

The status quo voice is loud: "Why do you need to do anything to try to prevent these shootings? They won't happen here. You don't know any of the victims. Taking on the gun lobby is futile. Americans have the right to own whatever guns they want. You're doing so much other good stuff you don't need to take this on too."

The status quo voice seems to be largely winning as it tries to drown out Jesus' voice, which is calling to us just as urgently: "You belong to me. I'm your Savior. I want to save the country from this senseless gun violence. Join my work—write your elected leaders. Fight for greater mental resources. Treat gun violence like the epidemic that it is. Care for families touched by it. Support legislation that will reduce deaths. You belong to me, so join my mission to end gun violence."

Complacency vs. joining Jesus' mission...it makes a big difference which voice we listen to.

Sometimes we switch over to hearing Jesus' voice towards the end of our life.

The last time I preached on the passage we're looking at today from 1 John, the sermon was different but had a similar challenge, to figure out whether we are going to follow Christ. The next week I got a letter from one of my favorite people in the congregation, a guy in his 80s I'll call Jim.

Jim usually sent me clippings from the Wall Street Journal, but this time it was a handwritten note saying that until a couple of years before, he'd thought he'd have to work his way into heaven based on how many good deeds he'd done in his life. He was so glad to have realized, near the end of his days, that

he belonged to Jesus and that his salvation was based on what Jesus had done for him, not on what he was going to do for Jesus. Grace, not works.

Jim could have kept listening to that voice telling him to worry about whether or not he was going to get to heaven. But instead, he let Jesus drown that voice out and tell him that he was saved by Jesus, body and soul, in life and in death.

Worry vs assurance near the time of death. It makes a big difference which voice we listen to.

I worry what voices are the ones we listen to most closely when we're at our most desperate. I've learned since I got here about the tragic spate of teen suicides here in Lake Forest a few years ago where young people used the trains as a way to take their own lives. I've heard lots of families here at the church were touched much too close to home. Suicide has come too close to my life too, but I'll talk about that in another sermon.

Suicide is now the number two cause of death for teens and young adults. The contributing factors are so varied and there are no easy answers or silver bullets of how to solve it. But I do think that the voice that often sounds loudest in the minds of those who attempt or commit suicide is "There's no hope for you. You can't compete with all those Brianiacs, or athletes, or dancers, or musicians around you. You're too fat, or too ugly, or too gay, or too dumb, to have any hope. You might as well end it right now. The sooner the better."

And that voice might be loud, but what if they also heard the voice of Jesus? His voice whispers to us, "You belong. You are mine. You're good enough. I love you no matter how much you succeed. I love you no matter how much you fail. You belong to me, body and soul, in life and death. And you have so much to live for."

Despair and hope. It makes a big difference which voice we listen to.

You know, I don't know which voice inside of or outside of you is trying to drown out Jesus' voice. Maybe it's the voice that tells you that your career is the only thing that matters. Or that as long as you have enough money, everything will be okay. Or that as long as your family doesn't disappoint you, things will be fine.

I'm not sure what it is, but I know those voices are out there. Calling to us. Trying to seduce us. Working their hardest to drown out Jesus. But Jesus can be pretty loud, too. Let's make his voice louder, by reading together our statement of faith, the answer to the first question to the Heidelberg Catechism. It's in your bulletin as the Statement of Faith following the sermon.

I'll read the question, and then join me with the answer. Let's drown out all those other voices.

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

*A. That I am not my own, I
but belong—*

*body and soul,
in life and in death—*

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

*He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.*

*He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head*

without the will of my Father in heaven;

in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,

Christ, by his Holy Spirit,

assures me of eternal life

*and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.*