

Easter 4, Year C  
April 25, 2010  
John 10:22-30  
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It is by now well known that the way we interpret our world depends a great deal upon the assumptions and perspectives we bring to the task of understanding what is going on. If a person believes she is fundamentally unlovable she will tend to sift out every sign, every indication that she is loved and dismiss them in favor of an emphasis on each sign and indication that proves she is not lovable. Similarly, all of us tend to look upon those we hold in very high esteem differently than those we are indifferent to, or don't like, or even despise. We may become very disappointed in those we love from time to time, but we will tend to interpret even their worst moments as aberrations, or lapses, even exceptions to a general rule, while interpreting the exact same behaviors as typical of those we do not like. And let us face it; between the Medicare prescription expansion and the first Economic Recovery Act, George Bush spent a meaningful hunk of his presidency acting like a European socialist, but that did not keep most of us from either loving or loathing him as a deeply conservative leader.

This fact, that the way we interpret both ourselves and others depends a great deal more upon our attitudes than any behaviors, provides us with what I believe is the best way of getting into today's passage from St. John's gospel. In the scene John has constructed for us a group of people, known only as "Jews"

demand that Jesus state plainly whether or not he is the Messiah. His response is that he has done exactly that, but they do not believe because “you do not belong to my sheep.” These people have a very clear idea in their own minds what Messiah is and how he is supposed to act, and they interpret Jesus through this set of understandings. It therefore doesn’t matter how plain or obvious he is, they will remain confused because he isn’t acting anything like the way they understand Messiah should behave. Only those who see in Jesus the face of God to begin with are able to interpret what he does as the work of Messiah. Most simply put, faith must precede understanding; faith indeed is the means by which we come to understanding in the first place. It is not, as St Anselm famously said, that I understand in order to believe, it is that I believe in order that I might understand.

This sounds very strange, that faith dictates understanding, but we do this all the time. I still remember somewhat painfully an incident in Eugene when I was in college. A panhandler with a strangely misshapen arm approached me and asked for spare change. Typically I do give quarter or two to such people, but for some reason I decided that this person was faking his disability in order to gain more sympathy, and so dismissed him, and was, I now think, rather offensive. Some time later and quite by coincidence I discovered his disability was real, and my previous understanding of this person was therefore completely wrong. Whether I had given him any money or not in that moment of encounter I realized then that my biases, my prejudices, my way of

interpreting what was going on protected me from a true and real meeting with another human being. My understanding insulated me from genuine encounter.

This happens not simply with panhandlers and in-laws, it happens in the more explicitly spiritual realm of life as well. We are equipped to see the holy in the grand and magnificent, for that is a familiar and comfortable framework. We can perceive the holy, at least once in a while in the beauty of this place, and the in the sharing of the Eucharist. We can see the holy in the birth of a child, in the splendor of creation, in the deliverance from disease or escape from an accident that might have been disabling or even fatal. We are of that flock, and we can hear the voice of God when it comes to us in those tones. But most of us are not so well equipped to see the holiness of God and the work of Messiah in the complexities of human experience, especially when they emerge in a broken world of hurting people.

Will Campbell, in his great book "Brother to a Dragonfly" wrote of a time of great personal grief when he received a kind of deep solace from an old segregationist who truly helped him through that time of pain. He realized afterwards that, strange as it may seem, he had been in the arms of what he termed "a racist Jesus." This did not, of course, mean that Campbell imagined Jesus to be racist; rather it meant something perhaps even more difficult for us - that the love of God, the presence of Christ - is at times mediated to us through those whose social and political beliefs, whose deepest values, are terribly, painfully, horribly at odds with ours.

The movie *Crash* illustrates the same difficult point for those who have seen it. Nothing is as it seems in that movie; everyone is more complicated than they appear at first to be. There is, for example, a bad cop, both racist and sexist who abused his power in truly offensive ways, but who also risks his life to save a woman he had previously victimized, and showed also a remarkable and tender care for his own disabled and sick, and difficult to live with father. To look at that complicated man through one set of lenses is to see nothing but horrible corruption and abuse. Seen in a different way, in a different moment, at least one or twice he became a channel of the care, compassion, and I dare say courage of Christ.

For those who saw the movie this is a terrible example of how God can work, but that is precisely why I invoke it. We are all that complicated; we are all that mixed, and similarly we all look at each other through filters that let some light in and block some light out. At times we are all that amorphous group John labels “some Jews” clamoring for a clear demonstration of just where God is in this world, but whose interpretive filters make it impossible for us to hear the true voice of Christ as he calls to us. And we are also the people who can at times hear that voice, and who are part of that flock. For Christ comes to us in many ways, some of which our faith allows us to understand and some of which our faith prevents us from understanding. Christ is in the Eucharist and the beauty of this place and the splendor of creation, as I have already suggested, and Christ is in the poor, the broken, the corrupt and abusive cop, the pan

handler with the twisted arm. Christ is in the one we don't like and in the one we love unreservedly.

What this means of course is that we can't simply assure ourselves that we are always and evermore in the flock of Christ simply because we hold certain doctrinal views about Jesus that enable us to recognize him. It was after all Christians whose doctrinal views were quite unimpeachable who launched the Crusades and hunted witches in Salem, Massachusetts and who turned dogs and fire hoses on people whose only offense was to march for the right to exercise the rights the Constitution of this great nation had already granted them. Being Christian, in other words, does not automatically make one a member of Christ's flock, nor does professing some other religious understanding automatically preclude one from hearing that voice, for the whole point of this sermon is that the human ability to hear the voice of God hinges not on the ideas in our head, but rather it depends upon our perspective, our interpretive filters.

If, for example, our spiritual imagination affords us only the scope to demand signs and manifestations that justify our own understanding and vindicate our own perspectives then it is just possible that regardless of the spiritual tradition we embrace we may well not often hear the voice of Christ calling to us. But if in addition to the obvious and splendid, and generally accepted manifestations of God a person can perceive in the broken and complex people of this world, and in the suffering that results from this brokenness, the

divine presence speaking to us with compassion and grace there too is the voice of Christ.

The challenge of this text then, at least as it strikes me, is for each of us to work hard to become aware of the ways in which our assumptions and perspectives limit our ability to hear the voice of Christ speaking to us. We are human, we are limited, so we cannot entirely overcome the kind of beliefs and perspectives we bring to the task of understanding the world around us. But we can become aware of those perspectives and learn how they limit us, and we can as well broaden those beliefs and perspectives in accordance with the image of the crucified and risen one so that we are able to hear that voice speaking to us in ever more full and clear ways.