

W Thomas – The Fourth Sunday of Easter - Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC – May 11, 2025

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We are hearing scripture today from the Gospel, where Jesus is talking about his relationship, and he's using sheep as the example that his followers hear his voice. So, in a second, we're going to talk more about listening, but I'd like to also remember on a day when we talk about mothers and motherhood, I want to remember the fact that my mother raised six boys, and I am the oldest of them, and that I suspect the first time I heard this said to me, and this may have been something reinforced in scouting, but I think the first time it was said to me was, there's a reason you have two ears and one mouth. You are to listen twice as hard before you speak.

And so that, as an abject example, is perhaps as good a sermon as you get when we have somebody like Jesus saying the things he is saying today. So, I'll tell you what the sermon is going to be about, I think. This sermon contemplates what it means to listen when Jesus says, My sheep hear my voice, within the framework of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, as lived within humility, found within the rule of St. Benedict.

So just hang in there for a minute. Okay, we'll come back to that. We know that listening to Jesus is important.

We know that because on the Feast of the Transfiguration, you hear the voice come in and say, "This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Listen to him. So listening is really, really important.

You're going to find, as you get to know me, I find the rule of St. Benedict, a 1600-year rule for being in community, the idea of what it would be to gather as Christian community when the folks came in from the deserts and found ways to hang out together. What would be the rule for it? The movie's been made about it or whatever. But when I first met your vestry to come here, I did something I've been doing all along.

I have a little book. It's a meditation book called *Always We Begin Again* by John McQuiston II, who is an Episcopalian and a lawyer. And about 25 or 30 years ago, he found life was making him crazy.

And he found the rule, and he took it, and he rewrote it in a meditative form. And it's incredibly powerful. And I've given away over the past 20-plus years, maybe 25 years, about 2,200 copies of this book.

And I'm going to just give you the first rule and then bring in those three points and then wrap it up and bring it home. Because there's a movement from, as you listen to this, from head to heart and then finding the way to know where you are in the midst, which as Christian community is one of our harder things to do. But when we do it well, we are incredibly gifted because then we are sharing the full love of Jesus Christ.

So the first rule, any good discipline has a good rule, is this. Attend to these instructions. Listen with the heart and the mind. They are provided in a spirit of good will. The first rule is simply this. Live this life and do whatever is done in a spirit of loving kindness. Abandon attempts to achieve security, they are futile. Give up the search for wealth, it is demeaning. Quit the search for salvation, it is selfish. And come to comfortable rest in the certainty that those who participate in this life with an attitude of compassion will receive its full promise.

So you hear echoed in that alone, living this life in an attitude of loving kindness. Micah 6.8, *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God*, which often is said to be the gospel in microcosm.

So in terms of foundational parts for our relationship together, for you to have an idea of where I come from and try to explain how the holy, the huge, the large touches me, and how I am going to try to find a way to bring it forth so that maybe you can touch me back and we can all grow together, I simply say this. Within the rule, there are some constants that guide. One is called stability.

Stability means sticking with it. You're in a place, you could be stable in the place, or with what work you're doing, you've got to work hard to stick with it. Some perseverance is not a bad idea.

And I'll come back to obedience in a minute. And then we look at conversion of life, which in the highfalutin Latin is *conversatio morum*, and basically that means being open to the fullness of all that God's got to offer you and finding a way maybe you have to change a little bit. So it's interesting, there seems to be a tension between stability and *conversatio morum*, but that's a good thing, because in the middle of it, when we do the three together, there's that word obedience.

Now there are moments, my mother had a very specific understanding of the word obedience. And when you have six boys running around the house, and the accessibility of a wooden spoon, which she said she never used, but we'll let

that go as family lore. I can still, when she moved her arm once, my shoulder went.

Anybody, she loved us. I posted something on Facebook today about my love for my mother. And anyway, obedience has its root in the word *obaudire*.

Obaudire means to hear. One who hears or one who listens is obedient. So being obedient to God is what? Listening to God.

Being open, and sometimes you may not hear what you want to hear from God. Sometimes God challenges you. You see how all of this works.

Now what undergirds it, and again, a deeper conversation at another time, is the word humility. Humility sometimes is bashed around and misunderstood, but the best definition I've ever found was by Mark W. Baker, a psychologist who wrote *Jesus, the greatest psychologist who ever lived*. He was doing a little piece, and he said, humility is strength under control.

Strength under control. And if you think about Psalm 121, where does my hope come? It comes from the hills. It's a way for me, poetically, of reminding me, where do I get my strength? And so I'm listening carefully to God.

And I'll bring in prayers later on that reinforce this. There's just so much we can do in any one time together during worship. We're listening, listening, listening.

Your search committee is working hard, listening, listening, listening to you, to God, and perhaps those candidates who may present themselves, and finding out a way, are they on the pathway to standing here and being with you? So listening is an important part, with all those other values built in. So the simple message is, we hear Jesus' voice, and you know, one of the reasons he chose sheep, is for his example. How well do sheep seem to listen? They need a sheepdog from time to time, and that's a story for another time.

So there are moments I'm not sure I like being compared to the less than bright of all of God's creatures, but then again, maybe by my own actions, I deserve it. And if I listened better, I would go clearly into the pen when the shepherd called me, and I would find the safety I sought. You can see how we can take that particular metaphor to its full degree.

There is an aspect in listening where you discover something. I have an expression, may the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need

it most. And that comes from being observant, or listening carefully to seeing it's being offered.

And sometimes it's a big thing, and sometimes it's so innocuous, you wonder what is it doing there? We have marvelous musicians here at Christ Church, and they're choosing the music. God, they're great at choosing the music. You don't want me choosing all the music, because you're at 8 o'clock, so this is a good deal.

And they have, for our 8 o'clock worship, 10 o'clock, 10.30 worship, chosen a hymn for around communion called *Gift of Finest Wheat*. And in the earliest days of my call into my priesthood, when I was beginning to try to understand at age 33 what the heck this meant, and I wound up in a congregational setting waiting to see if they would even admit me to seminary. The Episcopal Church in Zion, Oconomoc, Wisconsin, their rector would sing this on a regular basis.

And I'm going to offer you a couple of verses of it, because they tie in exactly perfectly with the Gospel text today in a way I did not expect. But they also tie in to that rule of Benedict, listen with the ear of the heart and the mind, because of the nature of bringing it forward in music suspends our ability to simply be here, but maybe tap into here a little bit. And as I offer this to you for a moment or so, it brings me back to that moment when I was beginning to find the constancy of God's love in shifting seas for me, knowing fully that God's purpose was laid out if I would but just see it, and maybe say, yes, Lord, I believe.

So, here it is.

*You satisfy the hungry heart with gift of finest wheat.
Come, give to us, O saving Lord the bread of life to eat
And when the shepherd calls his sheep they know and hear his voice
So when you call your family, Lord we follow and rejoice
You satisfy the hungry heart with gift of finest wheat
Come, give to us, O saving Lord the bread to eat.*

All these words I offer in the name of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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