



“Charlatans and Thieves”

a sermon by

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John 10:1-10

In one of his sermons, Thomas Long relays a story about a memorable dinner party. In his words, the dinner party had gone well. It was the kind of evening when good food was matched by rich conversation and warm cheer. As the dishes were being cleared and cream was being stirred into after-dinner coffee, the conversation took a more serious turn.

The guest of honor was a church leader from central Europe, the Soviet Union had come apart only months before, and the table was filled with eager questions. How had the church in his country fared during the long Soviet frost? What changes were occurring now that the warmer winds of democracy were blowing across central Europe? What wisdom did his experience bring for the church in North America?

He spoke slowly -- even cautiously -- at first, measuring his words, weighing their risk, a man unaccustomed to candor among relative strangers. Gradually gaining confidence, he spoke of dramatic shifts in the social and political climate of his region, of the church made strong through hardship and persecution. Indeed, with an eye cast toward the American religious scene, he observed that possibly the greatest threat to the church in his own land was the temptation to relax its guard in the new atmosphere of freedom, that the church could lose its sense of call by falling into an easy alliance with a seemingly friendlier culture.

He told about the days under totalitarianism, how the church was officially tolerated but always undermined and repressed, how the clergy were always monitored by secret agents who had infiltrated their ranks. "We would have a meeting about some matter of church business," he said, "knowing for certain that not everyone seated at the table could be trusted; some of the 'ministers' present were, in fact, government agents." He paused for a moment and then added, "But even though these government spies were careful never to betray their true identities, we could always tell who they were."

"But how?" someone asked. "The voice," he replied. "The voice. Something in their voices would give them away."

The voice. The words may have been smooth and well-chosen, but there was something in the texture of the voice that disclosed the agent of deception, the wolf in sheep's clothing. There was something in the voice that revealed the distinction between the true and the false, between the dependable and the treacherous. "Something in their voices," he said, "would give them away."

In a similar way, Jesus himself said that his own followers could divide the trustworthy from the untrustworthy by the sound of a voice. "They are like sheep who will not follow a stranger," he said, "because a stranger's voice they do not know. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd, and they follow only him." Because they belong to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, they respond faithfully to the sound of his voice and his voice alone.

The world is cluttered with voices competing for our attention. In fact a cacophony of voices shout for our loyalty, urging us to get into step...¹

Endless commercials, both on the television and at the theater tell us how we should shop. Countless magazines presume to inform us how we should dress, look, and relate to one another. News stations and newspapers believe it is their duty to educate us on how we should view our nation, the world, and politics – always of course with their own ideological spin or slant which is usually not so carefully cast behind a silken veil.

Our bosses tell us how we should view work, wealth, career, and power. Relatives and in-laws can't help but inform us how we should view family. And yes, let us not forget the church - that somewhere in the midst of trying to tell us how we should really view all the things already mentioned - sometimes actually presumes to convey to us how we should view God.

The world is quite literally filled with millions of voices, all seeking to garner our attention. And while the voice of Jesus may sometimes be heard above these clamoring voices, and it may even be heard in some of them, Jesus claims that his followers will surely know his voice when they hear it, that it will be a voice apart, and that they will be able to distinguish it above, beyond, through, and despite the false tones of strangers.

But what makes this so? What makes the voice of Jesus unmistakable to his followers? What is it about a voice that signals trust? What is there about the voice of Jesus that beckons his own to follow?

Part of it, of course, is familiarity. A true follower is familiar with the shepherd, they are a student of the teacher. They are used to listening intently to the shepherd's voice. They want to catch every word, understand every nuance, remember every phrase. They want to glean from the teacher's wisdom and knowledge. A follower is familiar with the shepherd because they have taken the time to study him, to mull over his words, and apply his principles.

True followers develop a relationship with the one they identify as their shepherd. They spend time with him in the field, and as they do so they learn his heart, they begin to understand his purposes, and trust his passions. They begin to know what he stands for, how far he can be pushed, what makes him angry, what makes him sad, what draws out his compassion. They come to know what he will fight for, or if necessary, even die for.

It is this kind of familiarity, this kind of relationship, that develops trust. And this trust, founded upon intimate knowledge, is above all, what enables the sheep to hear the voice of the shepherd - above, beyond, and through the clattering crowds, beckoning them to join him at the door of their folds.

¹ Opening illustration taken verbatim from "Knowing The Voice" sermon by Thomas G. Long

But in our story the Pharisees do not recognize his voice, even though they have heard it many times, because they have never been interested in the shepherd and therefore have never really listened to his voice. In their minds, they are the shepherds and Jesus with his radical teachings is a threat – not only to the sheep – but also to their own influence, power, and sense of religiosity.

In our story for this evening, Jesus is once again engaged in a conflict with the Pharisees. It seems Jesus healed a blind beggar on the Sabbath. He gave the poor man the gift of sight. He opened his eyes to a world he had never before known. He gave him a sunrise of colors, where once all he had possessed was the black of night. It was an act of mercy and compassion by Jesus, it was an act of transformation.

But the Pharisees couldn't get over the fact that Jesus had dared to do such a thing on the Sabbath. After all, in their minds, how could one be a prophet from God when he didn't even keep and respect the Sabbath.

Truth be told, had they listened more closely to him in the past, they would have known his voice and known that he was the Lord of the Sabbath. But instead they had only listened to the voices of their own religious sophistication, and because they had tuned in - for much too long, to the resounding clang of power and the shrill whine of their pride, they did not hear the voice of God beckoning them to rejoice in the miracle of a life transformed.

Instead they placed the once blind man on trial. They called him a liar and they threatened his parents. They hurled insults at him, labeled him a sinner, and threw him out of the temple.

But the once blind man, unlike the Pharisees, had listened to the shepherd, and he knew the voice he had heard, even though he had never seen the face. And so when Jesus appears once again before him, he recognizes him – not by what he has seen, but by the voice he has heard, and he worships him.

The voice of the Pharisees had an edge to it, it possessed a hidden agenda, it lacked proper transparency, and the once blind man refused to follow where they desperately wanted to lead; but the voice of Jesus, it rang out with authenticity and with life-transforming power and so the man with his new gift of sight fell down before him and worshipped him.

It seems clear, when reading our story amidst the larger context of the blind man, that Jesus is positioning the Pharisees as the stranger and the robber. Their conduct toward the blind man has demonstrated that they do not have the flock's best interest at heart, that they are little more than charlatans and thieves, whereas the conduct of Jesus towards the man has shown him to be the shepherd who comes to the sheep and to whom the sheep respond².

² NIT John, 668

Yet the Pharisees don't get it, so he tries to make his point another way. "I am the gate," he says. In ancient Palestine, when the sheep were out on the hills in the warm season they did not return at night to the village. They were collected into sheep-folds found upon the hillside. These sheep-folds were simply open spaces enclosed by a wall. There was no door of any kind – there was simply a break in the wall and at night after the shepherd had herded the sheep inside, he would lay himself down across the opening so that neither sheep nor predator could get in or out of the fold without stepping over his body. In the most literal sense the shepherd was the gate.

"I am the gate," says Jesus. In other words, "through me, and through me alone, can you find access to God." God cannot be found in strict observance of the law. God cannot be found in new age aromas or through any other form of super-religiosity. According to Jesus, he alone is the gate to God.

Now as post-modern people, we don't like to hear that. It's too exclusive and demanding. But they are Jesus' words. And so like the people of his day, we have a choice. We can heed his voice, follow him, and like the blind man allow our lives to be transformed. Or we can be like the Pharisees and choose to ignore the good shepherd calling out to us offering life. The road of the Pharisees is hard and it is long and lonely and dangerous. And while the road offered by Jesus is also long and hard, we are promised that when we traverse along it we will never be left alone. We will be protected by the shepherd's staff and we will find life and we will find it abundantly. May God grant to us ears to hear and hearts strong enough to respond.