

This is Christ the Shepherd Sunday. By recognizing that, we are recalling that Jesus **is** the shepherd, our leader who calls us by name. We hear his voice, we know his voice and we follow. That is what Peter and the other disciples ultimately did after Jesus was gone from them. Oh, we know Peter resisted. We know that he was so afraid when the Roman authorities arrested Jesus. He was afraid for Jesus but he was even more afraid for himself. He denied that he even knew Jesus three times. Then Jesus died a brutal, agonizing and humiliating death on the cross. Peter must have wondered about the meaning of all the work they had done together for three years. Then Peter and his fellow disciples came to learn that God was not finished with them. They encountered the risen Jesus and Peter heard Jesus pass authority for his mission on to him. The disciples realized that the end of Jesus' human life was not the end of God's mission with them. It was actually a new beginning.

How startling! Jesus' death on the cross was not a humiliating end as the Romans and the Hebrew hierarchy had intended, but a new beginning as God had intended... and as the prophets had prophesied.

The disciples ultimately embraced their mission to take on Jesus' mission. They were no longer afraid for their own lives. They began to focus on teaching the world about this life giving, love centered faith. This passage from Acts in our lectionary this morning, places Peter before the Sanhedrin, the ruling class of Israel. Peter and John had just been arrested the previous day for healing a lame beggar they found outside the temple in Jerusalem. It is clear that Peter and John heard Jesus' voice, and it is clear that the ruling class did not. In fact, the ruling class presumed that they had gotten rid of his voice once and for all when he was crucified on the cross at Golgotha.

They had seen him die. They were hopeful that all the trouble Jesus had caused for them had come to an end. They were hopeful for a return to life as usual.

But that was not to be the case. Just the day before there had been witnesses who saw Peter and John in healing a man by calling on Jesus' name. Peter had said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And the man had done it. Just like that.

Scripture tells us that the Sadducees, who were a sect of the ruling class of Hebrews, were "much annoyed" by the apostles. The apostles persisted in teaching people that Jesus had not died but that he had been resurrected from the dead. (John 4:2) The Sadducees were the sect of first century Judaism that was firmly convinced there could be no resurrection of the dead. But it was infuriating to them that in addition to that false teaching, these followers of Jesus were going about the countryside healing people in this dead man's name. They were sure that Peter and John were up to trickery and certain that they did not have a license to heal. So they had them arrested. In fairness to the Sadducees, The Roman hierarchy had given them the authority to keep the peace among the Hebrew people. It was they who were held accountable if crowds formed and people become rowdy or riotous. They had to quash this illegitimate and illicit behavior before it got out of hand. The behavior they saw from the apostles fell outside of their control. They feared the resistance and rebelliousness that would result these teachers were persuasive.

Just recently, a group called The Red Letter Christians held a conference here in Lynchburg. Their presence here reminds me of this scenario from Acts. They were inspired to visit Lynchburg because Liberty University recently banned someone from

the campus who held an opinion that the University did not support. The person who was banned was not a criminal and had committed no crime but the administration found his position to be offensive. I am not taking sides here, but I find this story to be an amazing parallel. The opinion the person held did not adhere to the bounds of the beliefs held by the Administration of the university. Those bounds are that the University has defined are not universally held bounds within Christian thought. That is to say they are unique to Liberty University. They ethical guidelines that the group, the Red Letter Christians, hold dear. Red Letter Christians believe in inclusiveness as they see set forth by the Gospels. That is to say that they bind themselves to what they interpret to be the essence of the Gospels. They do not believe that the Bible is an inerrant document. The Red Letter Christians opened the door to participation by Liberty University representatives at their event. The Liberty Administration declined to be represented. They chose to go a step farther and ban one of the members of the Red Letter Christians, Shane Claiborne, from interacting or praying with students on campus.

I wonder if the Red Letter Christians were guided by this story in Acts, if it might have prompted their decision to come to town. When the authorities challenged Peter that day to tell them “by what power or by what name did you” heal that man, do you think that he denied Jesus again? No. Peter no longer suffered from fear of retribution. The author of Acts tells us that when he answered them Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit. The answer he gave pointed to the power that came from beyond himself; he pointed to power that he derived from his relationship with Jesus. Like Paul and Luke

and Matthew and John, Peter had been transformed by his encounter with Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.

The authorities who questioned Peter had a deep and abiding belief in God. They believed that the laws and rules they knew and lived by were the bounds of a complete relationship with God. Those laws existed in order to make sure that everyone obeyed. More than love, they believed that God demanded of them strict obedience. But that obedience to the law required that some people be left out of the fold.... the lame, the malformed, the mentally challenged, the law breakers, those who aligned with their oppressors, the people who ate unclean food...by unfortunate circumstance their inclusion was prohibited in order to guarantee the sanctification of everyone else.

Then this man Jesus came along and challenged those rules. The Hebrew hierarchy were confident that he had no authority to do that. But God showed in raising Jesus from the dead that Jesus' authority came from a divine source. Peter and the apostles understood that and were courageous enough to proclaim it Jesus as their authority that day.

The people that Liberty University administration were within their rights to ban speakers whose message they had not sanctioned. But I wonder if the message they wanted to share was divinely sanctioned. How can we know when a message meets Christ's muster? We can only know if we know Jesus' voice.

This is why it is so important to dig in and get to know Jesus, and get to know the apostles who wrote about Jesus. Get to know their voices by reading and studying scripture. How else are we going to know Jesus voice when he calls? If it is not

possible to know the virtual sound of his voice, we **can** know the consistent message that comes from him. We **can** know what words are NOT from him.

St. John's offers a lot of opportunities to get to know Jesus' voice... You can choose to be part of a small group that wrestles with scripture. You can hear the voice of Christ in worship, you can hear it in the prayers and in our liturgies and hymns. And if you listen, really listen, you can hear him in the silence, too.