

In the name of the risen Lord, Amen.

On the first day of a new school year, the priest was walking along the corridor near the pre-K wing of the Episcopal school when a group of little ones went trotting by on the way to the cafeteria.

One four year old boy stopped and looked at him in his clerical clothes and asked, “Why do you dress funny?” He told him that he was a priest and that this was the uniform priests wear. Then the boy pointed to the priest's collar and asked, “Does it hurt? Do you have a boo-boo?”

When the priest realized that to the boy his collar looked like a bandage, he took it off to show him. On the back of the collar there is printing giving the name of the manufacturer and the size.

The little boy looked intently at the letters, and the priest asked, “Do you know what those words say?” “Yes I do,” said the boy who was not old enough to read. Peering intently at the letters he said, “It says, ‘Kills ticks and fleas up to six months!’”

This week, I was reading an article by Tom Long, one of the foremost preachers of this generation. He talked about his difficulty with this Gospel passage from the 10th Chapter of John. Tom Long hit on one of the things that had always bothered me about this section of the Gospel; that is – what is the image Jesus wanted us to understand? In

these metaphors, Jesus mentions: sheep, sheepfolds, gates, shepherds and thieves. Who *is* Jesus in all this? Is Jesus the shepherd, or is He the gate? And what about this sheepfold? How does that fit in? Just about the time we get one image firmly in our minds, Jesus changes metaphors and we have to re-center ourselves. .

Long has an interesting take on all of this. He says that the images Jesus mentions: sheep, shepherd, gate and sheepfold are like pieces of glass in an old fashioned kaleidoscope. If we look at the sayings one way, Jesus is the shepherd. Turn it a half turn and He becomes the gate; and so on. Jesus is the shepherd, whose voice the sheep follow – that is the first image we get. But once the shepherd has the sheep in the sheepfold – or enclosure – then we turn the kaleidoscope slightly and the shepherd lays His body across the opening of the sheepfold and becomes the gate, to ensure that no sheep can get out and no thief can come in to steal any of them.

You see, the important thing here is not necessarily that we understand *how* Jesus used each image or what experiences underlie each one. The important thing is that Jesus was trying to get everyone to look at Him as the true and authentic leader of all God's children, the only true example any modern-day church leader should have. Whether our image of Jesus is as the Good Shepherd, who would lay down His own life for His sheep, or the image is of Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold, perhaps the most important detail for us is that the sheep never follow anyone else's voice – only the voice of the true shepherd.

In the world today there is no shortage of people who call themselves “leaders” or “shepherds” of the flock. Long says, “Whether they be clergy or laypeople, pastors or teachers, gurus or denominational bureaucrats, youth workers or church school teachers, TV preachers or authors of religious books,¹” they all try to convince us that *they* know the way to follow in order to live into the Kingdom of God, or at least be spared from the fires of hell. How can we tell the true shepherd leader from the thief who wants to lead the sheep somewhere else? We listen for the voice of the true Good Shepherd to come through, because true leaders teach, preach and exhort in the voice of Christ.

But what about all of those competing voices out there today who claim to be teaching and preaching in the name of Christ and whose messages are absolutely counter to each other? I’ll give you a couple of extreme examples, Rev. Al Sharpton and Rev. Pat Robertson. By the way, have you seen the commercial the two have made together? It’s pretty good, on behalf of Al Gore’s Global Warming initiative – but I digress. It is hard to think of two messages that are farther apart than Al Sharpton’s and Pat Robertson’s – yet both claim to be teaching in the name of Jesus Christ. How does one know what is truly a message in the voice of the Good Shepherd and what is the voice of a thief?

Listen for integrity ... listen for authenticity ... listen for consistency.

¹ Long, Thomas G., *Shepherds, Strangers, and Thieves*, 27 Pulpit Resources No.2, April, May, June 1999

Al Sharpton's message of social justice is definitely from Jesus' teachings. There is no doubt that when we fail to honor the dignity of every human being – regardless of race, creed, color, gender or national origin, we are denying Christ. And when Pat Robertson preaches that Jesus will come again to judge all the world, there is no doubt that that is what Christ told us. BUT ... we have to lay ALL of what they teach out there and determine whether or not it all resonates with the voice of the Good Shepherd.

When Sharpton says things like, "If the Jews want to get it on, tell them to pin their yarmulkes back and come over to my house²." and when Robertson makes statements such as the one he made on a state equal rights for women initiative, that it was "about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians³," is there integrity in the whole message? Are these two men, and multitudes like them, consistent in what they teach? No matter how supported some of their positions may be, the messages of hate don't sound like the voice of the one who said, I am the shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

Jesus is the true exemplar of authenticity, integrity and consistency of message. From the beginning of His ministry to the post-resurrection appearance messages, He healed people of physical, emotional and spiritual ills, while constantly teaching them about the abundant love of God and how the Kingdom could be achieved if only they

² From a statement following the Crown Heights riots in New York, found on http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Al_Sharpton

³ 1992 Iowa fundraising letter opposing a state equal-rights amendment ("Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked", Washington Post, 23 August 1992 (found on http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Pat_Robertson))

would love one another in the same way God loves each of them. Jesus taught about social justice and judgment, but only in the context of God's love for the world. If one concentrates solely on those aspects of what He said – or for that matter, on *any* out of context slice of what He said – then the message becomes so distorted that it no longer maintains its power and relevance as a guide for our lives. Jesus boiled His message down in the only proper way to do it, when He told the Scribe that all the law and the prophets – in other words, the whole Bible – hangs on the words, “(L)ove the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself⁴.”

John and the other Gospel writers tell us quite well what Jesus' message was, but once we've heard that consistent message of God's love, where do we look to learn about our proper response to the message?

Just as John's Gospel tells us about who Jesus is – so, for example, does the first Epistle of John tell us something about who we should be in response to Jesus.

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ... ²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us⁵.

⁴ Luke 10:27 (NRSV)

⁵ 1 John 3:16-18, 23-24 (NRSV)

When anyone – and I include myself in this admonition – tells you anything about the Gospel message, test what they say by seeing if it rings with the voice of the Good Shepherd, whose voice we know and whom we should always follow. And when you discover that you're hearing the consistent and authentic Shepherd's voice, follow Him truly, completely and constantly in love.

Amen.