

On this Confirmation Sunday as we gather to worship God we will witness the Profession of their Faith by several of our youth. We will promise to engage with them and support them and all of our youth, and indeed people of any age in their journey of faith. As all of us look to express and live out our faith we should recognize that we are all invited into an intimate conversation, a crucial, life-changing, world-shaking, life-giving, continual, ongoing conversation, with, to and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the Tenth Chapter of John's Gospel Jesus describes Himself by using the metaphor, that He is the Gate of the sheepfold. Jesus is the Gate by which the flock can enter into sheepfold to find rest and security and the Gate by which the flock can come in and go out, and so serve God in God's world.

Jesus describes Himself as the Gate and will more fully flesh out all that this means in His declaration that He is more than just the Gate, He is in fact the Shepherd of the flock, the Good Shepherd of the entire flock for whom Jesus will live and die that they might have life abundant. But we should not go there just yet since this is not included in our reading from the first verses of Chapter 10.

As we focus on Jesus' role as the Gate for the Sheep, we should note just how much of this role as Jesus describes it, involves the sheep listening and hearing... The sheep – Jesus says - **hear his voice**. He, Jesus, **calls his own sheep by name** and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, Jesus says He goes ahead of them, and **the sheep follow him because they know his voice**. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because **they do not know the voice of strangers**.” Again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, **I am the gate for the sheep**. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; **but the sheep did not listen to them**.

To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus requires that we LISTEN to Jesus, that we listen not merely in the sense that we recognize that there is a sound out there but that we engage in active listening, paying close and full attention to the call of God on our lives. So this will be the focus for this sermon - LISTENING – LISTENING TO THE MASTER'S VOICE, LISTENING TO JESUS, who is the Gate and the Good Shepherd of the sheep.

Listening to our Master's Voice is a requirement for every disciple of Jesus Christ whether we are professing our faith in public for the first time as our confirmands do today, or if we have been disciples of Jesus for many, many years. It is as we listen, it is as we pay attention, it is as we hear the Master's Voice that we are shaped and so can be fully faithful. To the extent that we receive and apply the Master's Voice we can be the faithful followers that our Master asks us to become.

The Simpson family dog, Chipper, is now past his 13th birthday now and he gets more cranky every week! The week before last as one of the storm systems was approaching town – not the storm of this past week

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that did so much damage, but an earlier one, I decided to take Chipper out for our nightly wander along Ascot Ridge Road, knowing it was going to rain because of the storm and he hates the rain. I thought best to take him out for his walk and so be back before the storm arrived. So imagine the scene, there I am with Chipper and a couple of plastic grocery bags... we always pick up his.... well you get the picture. And we are walking along the street when the lightning begins flashing in the distance and the rumble of thunder grows, there is no danger overhead, it is still too far away, there is no rain, not yet! As the storm approaches every other dog in the neighborhood is barking and howling, but not Chipper. He continues about his business unperturbed, undisturbed, you see he is becoming increasingly deaf and his sight is not so great either, so far as he was concerned there was no storm! Even as the lightning was getting closer Chipper is not distracted nor diverted from his sniffing. Even as the thunder crashes nearer and nearer and the other dogs howl louder and louder, Chipper hearing nothing, seeing very little, wants to stop and smell the roses! To get his attention Janice or I have to almost shout and it is usually better that he can see that you are talking to him.

For Chipper to hear the Master's voice requires a bit of effort on the Master's part! Thanks be to God our Master, Jesus, who wants and wishes for us to listen and hear what He has to say has been and is willing to bear the effort to speak to us, to get our attention, and so offer to us the Word that leads to life, the words of comfort and challenge that we need to hear, receive and apply. In His earthly ministry Jesus had a great gift to welcome and embrace and so communicate with all types of people. Jesus told stories, shared aphorisms, used humor, picked up on the latest news, Jesus used every gift and skill and opportunity to communicate with the widest possible range of people. Jesus was a skilled communicator but more than this Jesus deliberately included in the circle of those who were with Him and heard Him, many whom society excluded out of fear or prejudice or some prior notion of morality. So far as I can tell, Jesus wished everyone to hear and receive and respond to the Master's Voice as he broke open for all the Word of God.

And what Jesus did in His earthly life and ministry was fully extended by what Jesus did and offered in His Passion. In Jesus' Death and Resurrection God's voice embraces all people of every time and shares His love with all. For us today, it is the crucified, risen, ascended Jesus who still speaks God's message, God's word, to us, to all. The word that is spoken to all is a word of love and justice and mercy. The Word from God, the Word about God, the Word of God, is a word that we so much need, because left to our own devices, shut off from the Master's Voice, we will end up listening to other voices which will pull us away from the abundant life that God has for us to live – the life of love and welcome, justice, and mercy, promise and hope, freedom and faith.

Everything is at stake in the sharing, hearing, and receiving of the Master's Voice – life and love. This is why you and I need to do all we can to be ready to listen and hear the Master's Voice. We should always be expecting to hear from God, because God always has something to say. Remember the opening verses

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of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". God the Word, is always and ever speaking and so we need to pay attention – to be in right place, at the right time, with the right attitude; we need to shut out distractions, turn off the TV or lay aside our computer or our I-Pod; we need to reduce the clutter and the noise; to have a clear focus when we gather to worship God, when we read scripture, as we pray.

In the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition we are taught to listen both individually and collectively. Left to our own devices, without the wisdom of the community individuals can sometimes imagine that God is saying all manner of things, but all individual understandings are to be checked out within the community of the faith. It is as part of the Body that we can best clarify all that God has to say to us and for us. We need one another in the church, we need one another so that we might all hear and understand and rejoice in the Master's Voice.

I would guess that there are some in the congregation this morning who still recall the voice and the tone of your drill instructor when you were enduring basic training in the Army or Marines. The cadence of the commands delivered to you and the rhythmic marching or running songs helped keep even raw recruits in time and focused on the task at hand.

Many of us likely also can recall the different voices that expressed or express the attitudes of our parents when they needed to get our attention. They had different names for us, they used different words to get our attention in different situations. The names they used, their tone of voice, the volume at which they spoke all communicated something – tenderness and affection, as they used their favorite pet name for us and at the other end of the spectrum a loud, edgy voice told us that we had done something wrong and that trouble awaited!

Those of us who are older or oldest children recall rightly that our younger siblings never or only very rarely heard the hard, edgy voice, certainly never as much as we did. I know that this was the case between me and my younger sister, Christine, even though she was always much less well-behaved than I ever was!

Parents had and have varying voices for varying situations for each and all of their children – sometimes a word of caution, a word of encouragement, a word of warning, a word of approval, a word of exasperation!

I once had a Math teacher, whose name I have been trying to dredge up from my memory, and I do mean, no offence to all great math teachers, dredge up from memory but I have failed. If things were normal, okay in the classroom, if I was engaged in the usual fruitful discourse about geometry or trigonometry or

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calculus – Calculus yuck! He would call me Jim. If he thought I was a little bit unruly or maybe not paying full attention, not that I ever did not pay attention, if he thought I was not doing my best work, he would call me “Simpson!” If I was well out of it, cheeky, disruptive, annoying my class mates he would quickly and abruptly get my attention and call me to task by calling me, “James.” He knew how little I liked being addressed as “James” and with the tone of voice and the stare he gave me, he got my attention. Of course, I heard him and immediately followed his directions or wishes – just like all of us adults and parents always did for all our teachers all of the time... so you children and young'uns all you have to do is follow our great example!

The Math teacher's voice, the Master's Voice was needed in the Math Class to get my attention, to me focused on what I needed to be doing. Our Master, Jesus, will use different tones at different times to get our fullest attention. Our Master will seek to address us in different tones all so that we might get the message and live faithfully. At times God may adopt a quiet, pleading tone; at other times God may need to be more direct and “in our face”! Always, God wants our attention.

People listen to me and very often if it is the first time we have met or I am in a store or a restaurant or on the golf course, they ask me – where are you from? I always say, “Rock Hill”, but they don't seem to believe me! I get asked where I'm from because they hear my accent. Wouldn't it great if people asked us on the basis of what we say and how we say it or what we do – where are you from? Whose values are you seeking to live by? Which Master is it that you are following?

William Barclay described one scholar's encounter with a shepherd which tells us much about the nature of Christ, he wrote this: “On some high moor across which at night the hyenas howl...you meet him. There he is sleepless, farsighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart. Constant vigilance, fearless courage and patient love.” This is a great picture of the love that Jesus has for all his flock, for all of us and for all people everywhere. Jesus our Master is ever vigilant, ever watchful, ever ready to intervene, to protect, to guide, to love.

It is the voice of this Jesus, the Jesus who loves the world, who offered His life for the world, that we need to hear today and always. The Master's Voice, the voice of Jesus calls out to all of us, inviting us to trust, to believe, to follow, to serve, to build community, to love God and to love our neighbors, to be church together. Amen.