“The Believer’s Instinct”
John 10:1-10

A Sermon
Delivered by
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

One of the realities that has become more a part of our society and our way of doing things in recent years is the increasingly robust security precautions we take when we travel. How many of you remember when you could walk all the way to the gate at the airport and say goodbye to your loved one? Or when you could actually walk out on the jet-way or even out to the runway to welcome your arriving family members? Well times have changed since September 11th 2001. We’re all familiar with those warning signs that indicate suspicious activity – we’re asked about them at the airport: Have your bags been left unattended? Has anyone approached you and asked you to carry something for them? Have you seen any strange behavior? What’s interesting about all of this is that while airports and security agencies tell us what the warning signs are that something bad could happen, they always seem to boil down the message to one very basic piece of advice, and it’s the most important point of all, namely, if something doesn’t seem right, it probably isn’t. So, we’re told to “report all suspicious activity.” It’s really an appeal to basic human instincts and intuitions. Sort of like, “if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, chances are, it’s a duck.”

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus says something remarkably similar to this. In John chapter 10, He’s pointing to the reality of false teachers in his day. “Strangers” is the image he uses to describe them - those who “don’t enter the sheep fold by the gate, but climb in by another way.” And rather than give his hearers a check-list of warning-signs that a threat is near, he makes a very simple appeal. Listen to his words again in John 10:1-5

“Very truly I tell you anyone who does not enter the sheep fold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”

To appreciate this image fully, it’s important to understand something about shepherds and the way they lead their flocks. Western shepherds drive their flocks from behind, corralling them from the rear with staffs and crooks. Near-eastern shepherds, on the other hand (the ones to whom Jesus was alluding), led their sheep from the front of their flocks, using their voices to prompt them to follow. In this case, the shepherd often used
unique calls or names that only his sheep would know. The sheep recognized his voice because of one reason - they heard him every day. Every day he calls them to the gate; every day he summons them to pasture; every day he speaks their name as they walk through the fields and valleys; every day they hear his familiar intonations as he brings them back at the setting of the sun. And because they hear him every day, because they’ve trained the habit of listening to his voice…his voice becomes instinctive to them. They know it implicitly. However, if a stranger approaches – a person with ulterior motives who comes in over the fence, the sheep know that too. The voice would be different, unfamiliar, discordant. He might look like a shepherd, act like a shepherd, even smell like a shepherd, but if he speaks a different voice than their Master, they will not follow him, and in fact, as Jesus said, they will flee, for they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.

Jesus is telling us something of profound importance. He’s saying if we are believers, genuine believers who’ve placed our faith in Jesus Christ, if we are “the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand,” we will instinctively know when something’s not right. If you and I are daily listening to the voice of the Shepherd through his word, if we’re training the habit of faith, and surrounding ourselves with wise counsel, then when the voice of a stranger or a strange idea introduces itself, we’ll know it! You see in every generation, the church must deal with the reality of false teaching or false teachers - those who climb into the flock, not by the gate, but by other means, those who “hold out the prospect of a higher better life, apart from the necessity of Christ and his word, those who deprive men of the salvation that otherwise might be theirs.”

In the immediate context Jesus has in mind the Pharisees - men who “held to a form of godliness but denied its’ power.” And Jesus had some very harsh things to say about these false shepherds. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus calls these men, “blind guides, who love the place of honor and the best seats, they are like white-washed tombs, outwardly beautiful, but inwardly full of dead men’s bones, they travel across sea and land to make one single convert, and when he becomes one, they make him twice as much a son of hell as they are.” But Jesus isn’t only speaking of the Pharisees - yes, they are the occasion that day for his teaching. But there is a whole backdrop or history of false teaching against which Jesus is speaking here: From the serpent in the book of Genesis who challenged God’s word, saying “Has God really said this?” To the false prophets of the Old Testament who promised good news to the people when in reality judgment was coming. To the priests of Israel who mixed pagan practices with the worship of Jehovah. To the false Messiahs in Jesus’ day who equated the kingdom of God with political rule. To the charlatans of the early church who tried to harness and peddle the Holy Spirit for their own gain...Jesus is warning us against all those past, present, and future, who would climb into the flock by another way to rob, kill, and destroy, who would “lead God’s people away from a pure and sincere devotion to Christ,” as Paul says in 2nd Corinthians 11. But the sheep need not fear. If we are listening to the Good Shepherd, we’ll know the difference.

What Jesus is really getting at here is something the Bible calls, discernment. Discernment can be defined as the believer’s instinct, formed by the habit of faith and submission to God’s will, nourished by the counsel of godly people, and held up to the standard of God’s perfect word. Discernment is the inheritance of every one of us who’ve placed our faith in Jesus Christ. It’s the by-product of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. When we trust Jesus Christ as our Savior and welcome him, by faith, into the inner places of our lives, the very Spirit of Christ makes a home in our hearts. The Bible calls him literally our “Helper.” His role is clear. Jesus says, the Holy Spirit will “lead us into all truth, convict us of sin and righteousness, and bring to our remembrance everything God has taught us.” The presence of the Holy Spirit gives us the power to discern,
to be able to rightly divide truth from falsehood, godliness from error, shepherds from strangers. The Scriptures appeal to this over and over. In 1st Corinthians 2, we’re told that we have the capacity to judge [appraise] all things for we have the Spirit of God and the very mind of Christ. In 1st Thessalonians 5, we’re told to not quench the Spirit or despise prophecies, but rather test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abhor every form of evil. 1st John 4 says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God…” In 1st John 2, the Apostle John reminds us that as believers, “we have an anointing from the Holy One, and we know the truth.” Writing against false teaching, he goes on to say, [Beloved], “I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. The Apostle is pointing out this instinct that lies in the heart of every sheep who truly belongs to Christ. It’s what prompted C.S. Lewis to say that “believers need to be reminded more than instructed.”

Several weeks ago after services one morning, I noticed that a little boy, not more than 2 or 3 years old had grabbed on to my leg, thinking I was his father. I wasn’t wearing vestments that day, and so like his dad I was wearing my uniform. When he did this, I paused, because I knew the moment he looked up and saw that I was not his dad, it was not going to be good. And sure enough, after a few second, he looked up and when he realized that he had been holding on to a stranger, he recoiled! His reaction was totally understandable. The man he thought was his father wasn’t…he was holding on to a stranger. His reaction was actually proof that he belonged to his real father. If you are holding onto the Father, if you are daily listening to his voice and walking in his will, if you’ve trained the habit of faith to listen to his word, if you’re surrounding yourself with godly people whose lives evidence the fruit and conviction of the Spirit…then you’ll know implicitly when a stranger or a strange idea comes your way. You’ll recoil like that child. I think of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17 where we’re told that “as he was in Athens and saw that the city was full of idols, his spirit was provoked within him.” The word, “provoked” in the Greek can be translated “greatly distressed.” Paul knew something wasn’t right. His internal alarm system told him – danger, suspicious activity!

Unless you are living in habitual sin, as a Christian you will never be at home with evil or error. That’s why, for example, when it comes to relationships or moral decisions about your life, no matter how hard you contort, if as a believer you are trying to make something work or justify something that does not please God, you’ll never be at rest. In fact, what’s more likely to happen is that in time if you don’t run to Jesus, you’ll become dangerously hardened to the things of God, and one day you’ll find that you no longer care for the things of God at all.

But this works the other way too. While sheep can recognize when something’s wrong, we can also recognize when something’s right, when something’s good and true, when we hear the voice of the Shepherd. A few months ago as Charity and I were coming back from Reagan National Airport where we were saying goodbye to our son as he went off to the Marines, we were walking out to the metro and noticed a man in his mid-30s with a beard who looked lost. Both of us, without saying anything to each other, could instantly tell there was something good about him – there was a brightness and a joy that were irrepressible in him. I went to him, and as we suspected he was lost and trying to navigate the D.C. Metro system. We all got on the train and sat down and we turned around and started talking, and as naturally as the air that we breathe he told us he was a believer here in town to conduct a lecture on the roots of the 2nd great awakening. We had never laid eyes on this man before and instantly knew that we were brothers and sisters in Christ. Our spirits concurred in the inner-man. Perhaps you’ve had experiences like this as well. But it gets better. As we’re speaking with this
man, another man, two seats away and across the aisle hears us and says, “I couldn’t help but overhearing, but I work for a Christian ministry in D.C. that supports the military and chaplains.” And so we all started talking and sharing… and there before a train car of curious onlookers, four brothers and sisters in Christ, not strangers, but sheep together in the safety of the flock, all heard the clear sound of the Shepherd’s voice.

I’ve thought a lot about that day as it relates to this issue. And it seems to me that in some sense, we’re all on that train car. We’re surrounded by all kinds of people and ideas in our lives - some good and wholesome, honoring of God; others false and deadly and destructive. In the midst of all of these voices, all these messages, don’t be deceived. Trust your instincts and report all suspicious activity. If something seems out of place or wrong, if it doesn’t agree with God’s word and the character of Christ, if it doesn’t resonate with the consensus of godly counsel, let me strongly warn you, flee! Have nothing to do with it! You’re in danger! Instead, listen to the Good Shepherd. Train the habit of faith by reading His word daily. Surround yourself with good and godly people, for “in a multitude of counselors there is safety.” And the Lord who is your Shepherd, will call you by name. He’ll make you lie down in green pastures. He’ll lead you beside still waters. He’ll restore your soul. He’ll lead you in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, but listen to the Great Shepherd of your soul, Jesus Christ the Son of God.

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Amen.