

Easter 4 2016

“My sheep hear my voice” (John 10.27)

It seems unlikely for a happy Washingtonian, but I grew up on a farm with 24 cows, 5 young cows (heifers), 60 chickens, 2 dogs, 3 cats, 2 ponies. (My brother thinks it was 200 chickens; maybe it was—memory can inflate, or diminish.) Once there was a sheep, Wee Willy. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice. They recognize and follow me.” In my experience, cows, ponies, sometimes cats, especially dogs recognize a voice. Not chickens and not sheep. Wee Willy never lived in his own pen. He wandered through sheds and fields quite independently. If you wanted to enforce boundaries, you chased high-speed, tackled, grabbed the fleece and hung on. If Wee Willy is a metaphor about God’s ways with us, I leave you to figure it out.

Someday I hope to write “Varieties of Religious Experience in the Lives of Animals,” a sequel to the William James book about humans. But not today. My dear friend Hazel, who had animals in the house (as we did not), would said, “Dogs and cats may not *sin* like people do, but they sure know how to push our buttons.”

Animals are different from people; animals are less self-defeating and more consistent. But voice and listener: that’s partial in animals; it’s human imagery. By hearing Jesus’ voice, unique individual humans in the gospels recognized him and discovered the resurrection. They show there are as many ways of hearing Jesus as there are people. There are several in scripture who suggest the diversity. In them you might see yourself. I choose three: John, Peter, Mary Magdalene.

John is the ideal: the beloved disciple. So tuned in that he hears internally, he doesn’t need words. On Easter morning, he runs with Peter to the tomb to investigate Mary’s report. Arriving first, he defers to Peter, who enters the tomb and leaves mystified. John enters, sees the grave-cloths, and believes! Later, the disciples go out for a night of fishing, entirely unsuccessful. The crew sees a shadowy figure on shore. He calls, “Children, have you caught anything? No? Try the other side.” The voice is *not* instantly recognizable, but after the miraculous catch of fish, the beloved disciple says, ecstatically, “It is the Lord.” Does he shout, or whisper astonished? The point is he knows for certain, in his deepest soul.

Peter, later the highest apostolic shepherd, is first a disorganized bundle of impulsive nerves. After the fish are caught, he jumps overboard and splashes to shore, leaving the others to manage the heavy-work. (You may know such evasion tactics from family or co-workers, as we do in the monastery.) On shore Peter stands at a distance. Ashamed, remembering his failure to

stand by the master several nights before. He had been a coward, not heeding Jesus' gentle warning. After breakfast on shore there is time to process, mend, and prepare for the future. Jesus tests his loyalty in several ways. We sympathize with Peter as he goes through this agonizing interrogation. Finally Peter, writhing, cries, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." We who have unresolved mistakes in our past, can identify. But we are encouraged that Peter finds closure and a constructive use for his failure. The best leaders know their frailty. It makes them compassionate.

Mary Magdalene, symbol of faithful love, is flawed in her excessive grief. There is no right and wrong in grief, and we must work through various stages. But it has to be said that some stages are selfish and narcissistic. There is underlying resentment: how dare you leave me, I cannot live without you. We can get stuck. Mary's experience shows how Jesus can get us unstuck. Any authentic relationship overcomes our barriers, offers the third option, the unimagined option called resurrection. Gradually Jesus chips away at Mary's defences, without instant success. She thinks he's the gardener; she wants the dead body; she wants her previous life-stage back. Jesus calls her name and there is recognition. She awakes, reorganizes, finds healing and power.

We do not have these experiences exactly as John, Peter, and Mary did. They are models and prototypes. Especially for us who live in the chaotic manner of that sheep from my childhood, Wee Willy. Wandering randomly at whim, heeding no inner voice, madly running from any discipline. There is the possibility of slowing down so we can hear the voice and respond. When called by name, we want to be quiet enough to recognize. We want to answer, "Yes, I am listening." There is no end to the possibilities that follow.

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