

When I was in college, I remember seeing some kind of advertisement for an Evangelical church or organization. The ad had a picture of an audio cassette. The text said something like, “If this tape had Jesus’s voice on it, would you play it?” And the context made it clear that whoever made the ad expected the viewer’s answer to be, “Yes, I would play it right away! Or at least as soon as I find a cassette player.”

It was an old ad even then, but I think the expectation dates it at least as much as the technology it depicts. Because today, a lot of non-Christians in the developed world want nothing to do with Jesus or his message. The Church has allowed itself and Jesus to be misrepresented in popular understanding. People see the worst things said and done by people who call themselves Christians, or people who claim to be acting in the name of Jesus and his church, and assume that they represent all Christians, or Jesus himself.

As frustrating as it is for well-meaning Christians like us to see this, we can only imagine how frustrated Jesus must have been to feel like he had to say, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” But Jesus did not let frustration define him or get the better of him. Nor does he call us to frustration; he calls us to abundant life and love.

But are we any better than the people who frustrate us? Would we play the tape? Or, more to the point, do we even want to hear the voice of the living Jesus when he speaks to us? Jesus said the sheep hear his voice, but does that always happen? Can we even hear him? There are certainly many voices competing for our attention, Jesus isn’t always the loudest, and we are exposed to many of those other voices for far longer than the one hour a week most of us spend in church. And let’s be honest: some of those voices are telling us exactly what we want to hear.

But those are only problems if we allow them to be. We can choose not to listen to some of those other voices, and tune out the rest. We can even talk back. The trouble is that we might not want to listen to Jesus because we ourselves are confused about who he is. We should be correcting the world’s ugly misconceptions about Jesus — it’s not like anyone besides the church is responsible for that — but sometimes, we allow those misconceptions to confuse us, and when we do, we fear that Jesus would say or do things that he would never do. Or we might be so afraid of being criticized or rejected that we defer to the world. We might give in to the temptations other voices offer. We might not want to do what he is calling us to do. We might not like what he has said to other people. We might not like some of the other people he is calling. Or we might be ashamed to be in communication with Jesus because we know exactly who he is and what he’s about, and we also know how far short we have fallen from what he intends for us.

Today’s Gospel shows us why these things are problematic. There are real dangers out there, but Jesus is not one of them. Knowing the truth about who Jesus is is essential. Not because he will punish us if we get it wrong, but because all the other

voices are leading us to dead ends. Besides, if sheep can make better choices than we can, that's a sad state of affairs. Jesus is the way, the gate, to eternal life, and he is also urging anyone who will listen to come in. Even his enemies. The last time John mentioned to whom Jesus was speaking, he was speaking to his enemies, so they might well be his audience for this discourse.

And we might not like that. When Jesus said he is the gate, he isn't acting as an obstacle, but as a connection between inside and outside, for he mentions that he will allow sheep to, "...come in and go out and find pasture." So yes, he is offering salvation, but the sheep pen is not heaven, because for us sheep, heaven is a one-way trip. I believe the sheep pen represents the church. Not just because a sheep pen is a messy place, but because of how Jesus portrays himself in relation to it.

Imagine a shepherd blocking the one, narrow entrance to a sheep pen, functioning as a gate. Though he cares for the sheep — indeed, *because* he cares for the sheep, he has to face away from them, to be alert to threats, and to be ready to welcome in any late arrivals. We might not like that, but how else could he offer grace to those who needed it most?

So, what if that's precisely what he's doing when he's describing this metaphor: what if Jesus is reaching out to his enemies, inviting them in with his voice, drawing attention to the entrance? What if he sees the good in the people who are mischaracterizing him, sees through their confusion and fear to the deep longing for God underneath? What if he wants to save them from the real thief?

That certainly makes Jesus sound amazingly inclusive when he says, *to his enemies*, "Whoever enters by me will be saved." Not whoever is "good enough," not whoever understands him, not whoever the insiders will like. *Whoever*. Just come in! It's like in every disaster movie when someone is desperately trying to bring someone else to safety. We'll deal with our conflict later.

Well, it's later. Our reading from Acts summarizes the growth of the early Church, and the safe, nurturing environment that existed therein. Though of course many people remained outside. The whole point of Acts is that the disciples became apostles and joined Jesus in being unreservedly outward-looking, despite all the reasons why they might not have wanted to. It seems like Peter never forgave himself for denying Jesus three times, but he showed profound courage and faith as an apostle because he knew that Jesus *had* forgiven him, and as a result, he drew many others into relationship with Jesus. A perfect example of how understanding Jesus correctly makes this life-giving work much easier and appealing.

Jesus forgives us for all our sins, even our reluctance to hear his voice, and never stops wanting to draw the whole world to himself in reconciliation. Therefore we should follow the examples of the apostles, looking outside our comfort zone, looking beyond ourselves, seeking out those in need of grace, seeking them out with vigilant compassion, combining fearless truth-telling with earnest invitation and heartfelt

welcoming. Other people need to know who Jesus really is too. Fortunately, we are not on our own.

God added to the number of the first church, and God will add to ours, but God will not call them for our benefit, but for theirs. We are not offering the world a recording, but a relationship with the giver of grace, peace, and life everlasting, who has already called us each by name.