



Sunday April 21, 2024
Mark 10:11-18 (Fourth Sunday of Easter)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Christ is risen! Christ is risen! I know I've shared this many times before, but just in case you missed it – I *love* the game of basketball. *These* days I love watching it, but in my younger years I loved to play...and let me tell you, I was *really good!* But I don't tell you this to brag – I'm telling you this because it will help you understand the next part of the story.

When I was young, club sports weren't quite what they are today, but they still existed. Back then the next level up beyond school and rec leagues was known as AAU and it's still around today. In fact, many NBA and Division 1 college players got their start playing on AAU teams. So, if you wanted to find elite level talent and competition, then AAU was where it was at. And from a very young age I was determined to make one of those elite teams. And in 8th grade my dream came true and I received an invitation to try out for one of the top AAU teams in Wisconsin.

So, why again am I telling you all this? Because a few days ago when I was in New Orleans, I was having breakfast with a few of my Gathering team colleagues and one of them surprised me by sharing how much they appreciated and admired the way I carry myself with humility. They followed that compliment by asking where I learned to be so humble. And after a brief pause, I told them this story.

In the summer before 8th grade I tried out for and made the team for one of most elite AAU clubs in the state...and I not only made it, but I was also invited to play on a high school level team. I had *a lot* of talent...but, I also had a lot of ego. And fortunately for me my coach was someone who would help me get my ego in check.

At our first practice I remember playing so well that I even outplayed most of my high school teammates and I was full of pride that I was living fully into my dream. And then at the end of that practice, it happened. As practice wrapped up, coach asked me to stay after for a few minutes so he could talk to me. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew enough to know that when your coach asks you to stick around after everyone else leaves...it's probably not a good thing.

So as my teammates left I walked over to coach, and he asked me to take a seat. My stomach sank thinking he was going to kick me off the team. And once we sat down, he started with this. He said, "*Tony you have incredible skills and today you played really well, but if you keep playing this way, you're never going to make it very far.*" Now I'm not sure "*shocked*" would adequately convey the gut punch I felt – *but* here we were.

And coach didn't stop there either. *However*, I had no idea how much the next thing he said to me would impact me and change the way I lived the rest of my life. He went on to tell me that, "*you might have the most talent of any player on this team, and you might score the most points, and win every game for us...but none of that is going to make you the best player.*" He went on to say, "*if you want to be the best player you can be then you need to get over yourself and start doing everything you can to help every one of your teammates get better and allow their light to shine brighter than yours.*"

It's taken me a lot of years to realize how much that one conversation with coach would change my life. And because of the care that he showed by telling me this, he taught me how to truly value others and in turn be the best me that I could be.

I'm deeply grateful to coach for shaping me into a better version of myself and helping me to see others differently and value them closer to the way God does. Somehow, coach knew something about me that I didn't even know about myself, and because of this he chose to use his voice to care for me, to guide me, and to help me become who I am today. In so many ways, coach Parkinson is responsible for the me who stands before you today. In light of today's gospel, coach Parkinson was the shepherd to a lost sheep, and he used his voice to guide and protect so that this lost sheep could find his way. I'm really thankful that I listened to his voice.

In today's gospel reading from John, Jesus says, "*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.*" And just two verses later he goes on to say, "*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.*"

You have no idea how much I want this to be true. I do. I want it to be true that you and I will not only *hear* his voice, but also that we'll listen and follow. The thing is, I'm not so sure that we always do.

We live in a very noisy world these days. A world filled with all different kinds of voices – *all of them* competing for our attention. And it seems incredibly difficult in the midst of all this noise to hear the voice of our shepherd, doesn't it?

I'm certain that in just the past week alone you and I have heard a number of voices – *all* competing for our attention. And some of these voices are incredibly good at convincing us to pay attention to them. They draw us in with



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ads geared specifically toward us. They convince us that we *need* whatever they're selling – to be safe, or to be popular, or to be successful, or simply to feel better. Modern technology and social media companies know us better than they ever have, and they use all that information to convince us that we need whatever they have.

So, just for fun, as I was writing this sermon I googled this question: “*Is my phone listening to me?*” The top hit was a simple answer, “Yes.” Have you ever had an experience of talking to a friend about buying something – let's just say a power-washer – and the very next time you opened your email or went on Facebook or Instagram or something else, and *there* were a bunch of ads for power-washers?

Yes, our phones and other devices are listening to us. They hear our voices. And then they try to draw us in. They know us, and all too often, we hear their voice, and we follow them. But the real truth is, they're just like the hired hand in today's gospel and they run away because they just don't care for us. There's only one true Shepherd. And *we* are all his sheep. And today, we're reminded to listen to *his* voice. Because at the end of the day, there's only one voice we can trust; one voice that truly matters. And that's the voice of the shepherd – the one who knows us – the one who lays his life down for us – the voice of our Savior, Jesus.

So why then don't we always hear *His* voice? And how might we hear it more clearly? Beyond the obvious reasons why we don't hear his voice – that there are too many other competing voices, and we don't always take the time to listen. I think one reason why we sometimes miss hearing Jesus' voice is that he's not saying what we expect to hear. Let's face it. None of us like hearing an answer other than the one we're expecting or at least hoping for. And so we tune out or turn away because if we're not being told what we expect to hear then it must not be worth hearing; that's the nature of the world we live in. But this is precisely why it's more important than ever to listen to Jesus with an open mind and an open heart. Not to listen for what we expect him to say, but simply to listen and allow our hearts and minds to be changed.

But there's another reason. Sometimes he's saying something to us that we just don't want to or aren't ready to hear. Remember Jonah? The Lord came to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, but Jonah turned and fled away from the presence of the Lord. Remember the rich young ruler? He wanted to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to sell all that he had and give it to the poor, then come and follow him. But that wasn't what he wanted to hear.

And this can happen to us, too. We don't always want to go where the shepherd is calling us to go or do what the shepherd is calling us to do. So, we give up listening to him. C.S. Lewis says that “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*”

You and I have heard a number of different voices this week for sure, all competing for our attention. But at the end of the day, Jesus seems to be saying to us, it is only the voice of the one true shepherd that can lead us to safety and the abundant life God promises. And it is *this very voice* that also unites us with the rest of the sheep.

I'm also grateful that you and I are surrounded by others who have spoken the Shepherd's voice *to us*. Those who have encouraged and challenged and taught us. All those who listened for the Shepherd's voice and in doing so taught us to do the same. Like coach Parkinson, they too are powerful voices of encouragement and challenge and hope. More than anything, in their own ways, they are shepherds who followed our Shepherd Jesus and taught us how to be and do the same.

In the third chapter of book of Revelation Jesus says, “*Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking, if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*”

My friends, the Good News for all of us is that our Good Shepherd speaks to us with a voice that penetrates through the conflicting sounds of chaos and confusion. Words reflecting a shepherd who lays down his life of his own choosing for those he loves. And in a still small voice that intimately knows us, our Good Shepherd speaks reassuring words of comfort and hope, love and mercy, grace and forgiveness. What more could we possibly hope for? ***Christ is risen! Christ is risen! Amen.***