

"I have told you, and you do not believe." With these words, Jesus answered those who stood with him in the Temple Portico and asked, "Are you the Messiah? If you are, tell us plainly."

"You do not believe," Jesus tells them, "because you do not belong to my sheep. *My* sheep hear my voice."

Our son, Patrick, is about to graduate from college and it is his intention to enter seminary and seek ordination to the priesthood. In order to do that, of course, he needs the blessing of his bishop and so he is going through a process the church calls "discernment". This is actually a process every Christian is called to put into practice on a daily basis, and today's lessons can be the starting point for learning how to do that.

The first reading set forth in the Lectionary is the story of St. Peter's visit with Dorcas who is raised from the dead by the power of God. We are told that her name is *Tabitha* or, in Greek, *Dorcas*. I always wondered why this woman would have a different name in Greek than in Aramaic or Hebrew, so in my preparation for this morning, I did a little etymological sleuthing and learned that both "Tabitha" (in Hebrew) and "Dorcas" (in Greek) mean "wild goat."

That's really not a very pretty name to give a girl... I don't think our daughter Caitlin would be very pleased if her mother and I had called her "Wild Goat Funston"! But I believe that in the underlying meaning of Dorcas's name there is a lesson for us.... It was in my clergy sermon-preparation study group, that I first brought up the question about the meaning of Dorcas's name(s), noting the similarity between the name "Tabitha" and the word "talitha" which Christ used when raising the daughter of Jairus, leader of the synagogue in the fifth chapter of Mark. (Mk. 5:41) After we had looked in various commentaries and dictionaries and learned that "tabitha" and "dorcas" mean "wild goat" (as opposed to "little girl" which is what "talitha" means), we had a good laugh about the image of the church as full of "wild goats"; it provides quite a contrast to the image of the church as full of the "sheep" of Jesus the Good Shepherd!

Perhaps, the contrast between "wild goats" and sheep who know their Master's voice is one that we ought to further explore.... After the story of her resuscitation, Scripture doesn't tell us anything more about Tabitha, so I don't want to blacken her reputation by suggesting that she was not a good member of her church community. But her name does give us something to think about.

What distinguishes a "wild goat" from a "sheep"? We know that that distinction is going to be made some day... Christ promised his followers that on the Last Day

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:31-32)

So what is the difference? It is, I suggest, that the sheep, as Jesus said, "hear my voice." Earlier in this same chapter of John, Jesus said of his sheep, "I know my own and my own know me." (John 10:14) The sheep knows the shepherd; the wild goat does not. The sheep recognizes and understands the shepherd's voice; the goat does not. The means by which the sheep does so is that process we call "discernment." The sheep is discerning, while the goat is well, what *is* the goat?

A helpful way to answer that question might be to place "discernment" on a spectrum of understanding ... place it at one end of the spectrum and something else at the other. If "discernment," recognizing and accepting the voice of God in one's life, is at one end, what would be at the other end? I thought about using "ignorance" as a possible label, but as I considered that I realized that in our culture "ignorance" is a pejorative ... we seem to hold the ignorant accountable for their own lack of knowledge and understanding; "ignorance" is an active, intentional state of mind according to our culture. So let me suggest "obliviousness" as an alternative ... At one end of our spectrum of understanding is recognizing and accepting the will of God in one's life; at the other is complete, innocent, blissful lack of awareness of God.

The "wild goat" might be all the way down at that oblivious end of the spectrum, but the goat might be at other places along it as well.... Let's map out at least three other possible points along the range between our end points. Moving from the "obliviousness" end, we would come next to "awareness". At this point one might sense something but not recognize it as anything other than some sort of "white noise" or background static, like the rustle of the wind in the leaves or the babbling of a brook or the sound that accompanies the "snow" on the screen of a television that is not receiving any coherent signal.

Up from awareness is "perception," at this point the "noise" becomes recognizable ... It is no longer background "white noise" but a coherent presence. If we think of it in terms of hearing the

Shepherd's voice, we may say that at this point we recognize that the sounds are words ... but we may not understand the meaning of the words, sort of like hearing someone speak in a foreign language: we know that the sounds have meaning, for someone, just not for us. This leads to the last point we will label on our spectrum, and that is "understanding." At this point, the words coalesce into intelligible language which we can and do understand. The next and last point on our gamut of understanding is "discernment". At this end of the spectrum we are aware of the sound of the Shepherd's voice; we perceive that the sound is language; we understand the words the voice is speaking; and with discernment we come to understand that the words are directed to us. The sheep who hear, know, and follow the Shepherd are at this end of the range.... the wild goats could be anywhere else along the spectrum, from blissfully oblivious to recognizing and understanding, but willfully ignoring, the voice of God.

Now, we must ask, which are we? If discernment is the process by which we come to know God's will, then this question of whether we are sheep or wild goats becomes, "Are we seeking God's will for our lives both in the fundamental issues and directions of our lives and in the here-and-now, particular situations in which we may find ourselves?"

To even get to this question requires that we accept and believe certain things about God... and that acceptance and trust is, itself, a result of discernment. These fundamental truths are, first, that God has a plan for human life and, indeed, for each human being's life; second, that God wants to, is able to, and does communicate God's plans for us to us, both corporately and individually; and third, that we are able to perceive, understand, appreciate, and actively accept God's plans for our lives. In order for the question about God's will in our lives to make sense, we must not only agree with these truths, we must intentionally incorporate them into our lives and into our perceptions of reality. We are called not simply to accept these statements as theories, but to live as witnesses that they truthfully, accurately describe how our world really is. This is what the life of discernment, the life of the sheep who know and respond to the Shepherd's voice, is all about.

Here are some practical suggestions to aid you in practicing discernment:

First, be patient.

Don't get discouraged if this whole process seems overwhelming, frustratingly slow, or (at

times) going nowhere. God is with you, and is leading you, through it all. The sheep don't know where the fold, or the watering hole, or the pasture land may be, but the Shepherd does. Be patient.

Second, trust God.

When you *need* to understand, God will enlighten you. Jesus the Good Shepherd will shepherd you out of the dark valley. As the Lord of your life, he knows *what* you need and *when* you need it. Trust God.

Third, distinguish voices.

Seek to distinguish the many voices within you; this is what St. Ignatius Loyola called "discerning the spirits." Often it is difficult to name the various desires that pull us in different directions. Different voices, besides God's, which you could hear within you include these:

1. *Your own* -- All sorts of desires speak within us, from natural and healthy ones to some which may not be so healthy....
2. *The world* -- We pick up the voices of the culture in which we live and these can direct us in ways contrary to God's will; these may be the voices of advertising, of politics, of popular entertainment, or of dysfunctional family systems....
3. *The devil* -- We modern scientific folk don't like to admit it, but there is personal evil in the world; there are forces of chaos bent on destroying good; these can and do seek to influence what direction we take....

This naming of voices is an important step in discernment. If we are to know, recognize, and follow the Shepherd's voice, we must pick it out from among the many we hear. Distinguish voices.

Fourth, pray.

Through prayer, we learn to hear the voice of God and we allow God's voice to become clearer and stronger in our lives. The other voices diminish in strength as we pay attention to the voice of the Shepherd. Praying with Scripture, spending time with the Bible, and meditating upon what the prophets, sages, evangelists, and apostles have written, is an excellent way of getting into contact with the voice of God. Pray.

Fifth, rely on others.

Turn to other's whom you trust. They may be friends who know you and who also know the

Lord. They may be leaders in your church. Another way of relying on the help of another is to work with a spiritual director. Through a spiritual director, God often will provide us with a light and an understanding about what we are to do. Rely on others.

Sixth, surrender yourself to God daily.

Take Jesus as your example; the Gospels record several times when Jesus went away to a private place to be with God. The most familiar, perhaps, is his last night in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk. 14:32-42). He regularly sought his Father's will and he always discovered it in his daily private prayer. Surrender daily.

Finally, be encouraged.

Remember that God is with you and will never forsake you. God wants to lead you and, if you will follow, God will lead you; Jesus did not use the image of the Good Shepherd unadvisedly! God is pleased when we take the time to seek what God wants for us. Realize, and be heartened by the realization that, God is pleased with you. Be encouraged.

There is a wonderful prayer for discernment written by the late Thomas Merton and published in his book *Thoughts in Solitude* (Noonday Press, 1999). I want to close this morning by offering that prayer. It is the petition of the sheep to the Shepherd, the prayer of the ones who hear and know his voice that they may continue to hear and know his voice. It is the prayer the wild goat needs to learn:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does, in fact, please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.