

Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice."

Hearing a voice is not quite like the other senses: it is not like seeing an object or touching an object. When we hear a voice, a motion of air in one person's throat makes the vocal cords vibrate a fraction of an inch. Then another person, separated by thin air from the first person, feels in his or her ear, a motion in the air that makes the inner ear vibrate a fraction of an inch.

A voice has none of the qualities that we usually think of as being real: a voice does not weigh anything, it does not take up space. If another person can't hear a voice that you hear, it is very difficult to prove to him that the voice exists. The person has to trust you until they can hear the voice for themselves.

But the voices we hear are tremendously important in our lives. In fact, the primary way that human beings understand each other and build relationships is by listening to each others' voices. There are things loved ones have said to us that have given us encouragement or reassurance in tough times. We remember good advice we have heard, which has pointed us in the right direction. And most important, we have heard that we are loved.

A young New Yorker who went to seminary wanted to try something a little different, so he took a summer internship on a team of rural clergy in the Northwest. The church he served was so rural that there were no apartments available near it, but one of the church families had an extra bedroom and offered to let the seminarian stay with them for the summer. They figured having a New Yorker in the house might be a little like hosting a foreign exchange student.

In the beginning it was hard for the city boy to adjust to this remote life with no cell phone signal or internet access. The family's TV was so small it hardly seemed worth watching. There was no "nightlife." At first he even found it hard to get to sleep at night without the sounds of traffic in the street.

But the host family had a teenaged son who befriended him. In their free time, they went for leisurely walks in the woods, or went canoeing on the river. They sometimes camped outside, and the seminarian was amazed at how many stars he could see, once he got away from the city lights. The teenager taught him a little about the local birds and animals and trees. They talked and laughed and told stories all summer long.

At the end of the summer, the seminarian went back to New York and fell right back into the busyness of his old life. After a few months, he got a call from the teenager, asking if he could visit him in New York. The seminarian was glad to have a chance to show him the sights of the city, and they spent several days mostly looking at tall buildings. Then as they were walking toward the subway, the teenager suddenly exclaimed: "It's a cricket!" "A cricket?" said the seminarian. "Yes," said the teenager. "I heard a cricket." The seminarian sighed. "You're in the middle of New York City. There aren't any crickets around here. And even if there were, you couldn't hear it with all this traffic noise, and people yelling, and music blaring. It must have been something else." But the teenager stood very still, and listened. And then he started walking slowly in the other direction, pausing once in a while. The seminarian followed him as he turned a corner and walked up to the entrance of a ritzy hotel, with potted topiary trees in front of it. The teenager bent over to look at a leaf on the topiary tree, and there, sure enough, was a small green cricket. "How could you possibly have heard that little cricket with all this commotion going on?" the seminarian asked. The teenager smiled and simply said, "You hear what your heart is trained to listen for."

My own experience of listening came on a retreat for clergy an Episcopal monastery near Boston, with the Cowley brothers from the Society of St. John the Evangelist. We participated in the rhythm of their worship services, and we had plenty of time for prayer and silent contemplation. I enjoyed the music that the monks chanted, and the stately stone architecture, and the bright flowers in the chapel. But at first I got a little fidgety in all that silence. I wondered what to do when I ran out of things to say to God. Brother Geoffrey gently reminded us to listen for the voice of God.

I began to consider what we do when we are listening for a voice. When we are intent on listening, we become quiet, and sit very still, and pay attention. Sometimes we even close our eyes so that we can listen without distractions.

Being at the monastery was a little like living in a foreign culture for a while. I saw the way the monks lived in an ordered rhythm in which there were times for prayer, times for work, times for rest, times for music, times for conversation, times for silence. It made me think of how different this life is from the life my friends and I live, how often we feel rushed or scattered, how hectic multitasking feels, how there is a particular kind of boredom that comes from overstimulation, how there always seem to be more demands on our time, and how often the things that truly matter most to us get lost in the shuffle. I wondered whether it seems so hard to hear our shepherd's voice, because we are a like a flock of sheep running around wearing headphones that play loud music all day long.

It may seem like listening for God's voice is a luxury, something we will get around to "when we have more time," "when we are not so busy." But the more busy we are, the more desperately we need time to listen for God. God knows that this listening is so important for us that God made it one of the Ten Commandments: to set aside sabbath time for rest and time with God.

Brother Eldridge said that when people who do not have a disciplined prayer life ask him for counsel, he often tells them to commit to spending two minutes each morning in silence with God. Not twenty minutes, not sixty minutes. Two minutes. And when they do this, they find that they gradually begin to hear their shepherd's voice during those two minutes. And even more important, moments of prayer bubble up in the rest of their day as well. You hear what your heart is trained to listen for.

We come to worship because we have heard our shepherd's voice, and because we want to hear our shepherd's voice. Our shepherd has been calling us throughout our lives. So take sabbath time. Rest. Be silent. Pray. Listen.