

May 7, 2017 (Confirmation Sunday) – Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ? This is a common question in American churches today. But it's not something you hear a lot in LCMS congregations. And you might be wondering why.

When so many Christians pin their entire salvation on having a relationship with their Lord. When so many Christians would say that a day like today, when we are confirming a young woman in her Baptismal faith and calling her a disciple of Jesus Christ, is exactly when we should be asking her, “Do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ?” Why don't we focus on that very question?

Well, there's a couple reasons. And like many important matters of faith and doctrine, it all comes down to defining terms. Because before you can ask, “Do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ,” you have to first know, “What is a relationship with Jesus Christ?” and “How do you have a relationship with him?”

And many, many people never consider those questions. They just assume a relationship with Jesus is like a relationship with a spouse or with a best friend. But over and over again, one of the Bible's most common ways of describing the relationship between God and his people is that of the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep.

Do shepherds and sheep really have a “relationship?” I mean, one of them is an animal. A rather stupid, clumsy animal actually. They aren't even semi-intelligent pets like cats and dogs. They're livestock. Property to be herded around a farm and kept from killing themselves. *That* is our relationship with Jesus Christ?

Well... yeah. It is. But there is a little more to it than that. Sheep are dumb, but they're not completely without any intelligence. Because they can still learn to do one thing. They can still learn to listen to their shepherd. They can still learn to trust their shepherd. They can still learn to follow their shepherd's voice.

And that's really the core of the relationship that Jesus describes today in our Gospel lesson. *“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”*

That is our relationship with Jesus in a nutshell. Jesus speaks, and we know his voice. Jesus calls us by name, and we come to him. Jesus goes before us, and we follow.

It's a very simple relationship. A deceptively simple relationship, to be honest. Because there's more that goes into that relationship than we may first realize.

For one, knowing Jesus' voice means hearing his voice. Over and over and over and over again. Hearing it so often that you recognize it the moment that you hear it. Hearing it so often that you can recognize it in a crowd of other voices. Hearing it so often that when a thief climbs into the sheepfold and tries to imitate Jesus' voice to steal you away from him, you still recognize that it is not the voice of your shepherd calling you.

And where do you hear Jesus' voice? Well, primarily, you hear it right here. Our culture today, even among many Christians, would have you believe that church attendance is optional and unnecessary. “You're not saved by how often you go to church,” some will say. “I can be spiritual all on my own,” people will declare.

And that's true, to a degree. But it's also a really, really dangerous way to live. Because if you're not hearing the voice of your shepherd, then it's really easy to be stolen away. If you're not hearing God's Word proclaimed to you in all its truth and purity. If you're not hearing God's Law in all its condemnation, and hearing Christ's absolution in all its mercy. If you're not gathering at the altar to hear Jesus himself say, “This is my body and my blood given to you for the forgiveness of your sins.” If you're not hearing these things, how can you possibly know what Jesus' voice sounds like?

Peter warns of that in our epistle lesson. He warns his readers of the suffering that will occur in this life to every Christian. Suffering that can easily tempt a person to doubt and disbelief.

But then he says, “Look at Jesus Christ. Listen to him. Listen to all that he has done for you. Listen to all that he has suffered for you. Listen to the way that he has sacrificed himself to bring you back.”

“You were dead in your sin. You did not know your Lord's voice. You strayed away like the sheep that you are. But he is your Shepherd and Overseer. And by his wounds you have been healed. Through his death and resurrection you have returned to his loving care.”

So regular worship in the Lord house – hearing his Word and receiving his sacraments – is a huge part of what it means to be a sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock. It's a huge part of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. But it's not the only part.

Because there are plenty of other opportunity to hear our shepherd's voice too. Our first reading talks about what the life of those early Christians looked like. And it includes a lot of things we would recognize. Teaching. Christian fellowship. The Lord's Supper. Prayer. Generosity.

They were devoted to a life of discipleship. Day by day, they lived out their calling to be the light of the world. And in that calling, they heard the shepherd's voice.

Olivia, you've heard his voice too. You've heard it in the teaching of the apostles' that Josh gave you every week. You've heard it in the Christian fellowship of youth nights and lock-ins. You've heard it as we prayed together. You've heard it as we've given tithes and offerings of thankfulness to our God.

You've heard it as you stood at the base of these steps, holding that tray for the empty communion cups. Watching as this congregation walked up to the altar with contrition and repentance for all their many sins and then left it with the joy of sins forgiven through the Body and Blood of our Lord.

Confirmation isn't just about learning a bunch of facts about the Bible. And it's certainly not a graduation from the Church. No, confirmation is about learning to recognize the voice of your shepherd, so that you stay close to him all your life.

So that you are never drawn away by thieves and robbers. Men and women who come only to steal and kill and destroy. People who claim to offer you abundance.

Abundant wealth. Abundant success. Abundant pleasure. The world claims to give you everything in abundance. But it steals away the one thing that matters: your life. Because no matter what the world offers you, it will always end one day in your death. And then all of it will be gone.

Only your shepherd can offer you life. Life in abundance. Life that never ends. Life even after death. Life like the one he showed us when he rose from the dead that Easter morning.

Do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ? The better question might be, “Does he have a relationship with you?” Because it's Christ who does all the work in this relationship. As I said earlier, it is he who speaks through his Word. He who calls us by name in the waters of Holy Baptism. He who goes before us and leads us to green pastures of eternal life.

It is he who chooses to have a relationship with us. And we? We are merely sheep in his flock. It can sound like such a daunting task to be his disciple. But it's really not. Because he has done all of the work. How hard is it, really, to listen to his voice? Come when he calls? Go where he leads? Even a simple sheep can do that.

And when we stray, he comes and he finds us. He sacrifices everything to search us out. He lays down his very life for us. Because as his flock, as his sheep, as his beloved child, he has made a promise to you: that you will never perish. And no one can snatch you out of his hand. Amen.