FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Soundings”*

The title of this sermon, *Soundings,* is a nautical term meaning: the action or process of measuring the depth of the sea or other body of water. So, the word does not refer to “sound” *per se,* but rather to depth.

I still chose to title the sermon like this anyway because, well I like the word itself—the way it appears *and* what it means—and the way it can encourage us to go deep in our desire for union with God, *and* because in order to do that we are going to have to be attentive, specifically, to the *sound* of God’s voice.

At least, that is what Jesus tells his disciples in the passage we heard from the Gospel of John, as he talks to them of shepherds and flocks of sheep. This is something with which they would have been familiar even though Jesus, himself, had been a carpenter, and most of the rest of them were fisher-folk with a tax collector or two thrown into the mix.

It would have been a familiar sight to Jesus and the disciples to see flocks of sheep grazing in meadows or being herded through the villages they lived in or traveled through. So, they would have been familiar with many of the ways of sheep.

For example, it’s probable that, even before he said it, the disciples would have known how sheep are very good at discerning the sound of their shepherd’s voice, as opposed to anyone else’s. The disciples would have known how sheep are adept at knowing which of the voices they were hearing was the one that did, indeed, lead them “beside the still waters” and into vast meadows of lush green grass.

And so the sound is very important. It is important in the gospel lesson, and in the epistle where John points out how we have received from Jesus a new commandment to love one another. Once again: in order to receive this commandment we must *hear* it, we must *listen*.

Hearing and listening. I think most of us realize that the two are *not* the same. *Before* we recognize and respond to a sound, we must listen for it. And so, listening, in-and-of-itself is an act of discernment. In order to listen we must first filter out all of the other sounds that surround us all of the time.

For the sheep, it means listening for the particular tone and cadence of the voice that has led them to safety and plenty so many times before. The voice, and its owner, who guards them even with his life; the voice, and its owner, who has spent the most time with them, and who does not come and go with the seasons, but stays with the flock consistently over the long-haul of their life—this is the voice they must listen for and to whom they must respond in order for life to continue and to flourish.

So, if this connection between the shepherd and the well-being of the flock is facilitated by recognition of their shepherd’s voice, what does that mean for the kind of listening involved in responding to *our* shepherd’s voice, the *Good Shepherd* that Jesus identifies as himself, in the Gospel lesson?

Few of us enjoy being compared to a flock of sheep. However, it must be admitted that we have in common with them the same need to listen, *really* listen to who is talking, and what is being said. For sheep, this activity is relatively simple. For you and me…not so much.

While the sheep may have one or two people who come upon them trying to lead them astray, human beings have so many more voices constantly vying for our attention and loyalty. Listening becomes even more important but also much more complex—at times, it is even frustrating.

This is because, even in the most secular of spaces in which we live and move (and, yes, there are so many more of them than ever before), still you and I must still listen for whether or not the voice of God is being affirmed or repudiated. Are we being called to love others, or only self? Are we being called to value life, or diminish it for others?

And if we do not hear the life-affirming voice of love, if the voice we believe is life-giving and all-loving is being corrupted, co-opted, or rejected *we must be able to hear that in order to respond* appropriately. Indeed, our response will assert our faithfulness and our commitment to God’s voice and ways, or our turning aside for another way.

Even this, this business of preaching which I am performing and you are consuming in this very moment. I can preach for you for a lifetime, but if you do not recognize the “sound” of God in my voice, in my words, then something has got to change. Indeed, you should demand it of *me* and of *yourself*.

Is what you are hearing speaking to you clearly of compassion? Is it speaking of the importance of treating others with fairness, are you being encouraged to have empathy for other people—even others who are very unlike us?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus introduces this very aspect of sound and listening. In verse 16, he speaks of *“other sheep”* and he says that they *“do not belong to this fold,”* yet he tells us that he must bring them in, and he promises that they, too, will listen to his voice. What is important here is that their listening will make us one flock with one shepherd.

The question becomes: who is this shepherd?

Now I can well imagine most of us *hearing* that question and shouting, “I know the answer to that!”

While I will not refute the word that is falling from your lips even now, what I would like you to do is to listen to the question once more. I am not going to say it out loud. You are not going to hear it with you ears. Rather, I would like you to repeat and hear it in your heart. You may choose to hear it phrased the way John wrote of it in the portion of the first letter we heard earlier”

*16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

*This* is the way we strike soundings in our faith, in our own heart and life: we check the depth of love that is being encouraged knowing that God’s love is eternal, and unconditional; that God’s grace is infinite.

We ask about the quality of the love that is being expounded on. Is it love of self, or does it point to a place beyond ourselves and our own? In this way, we check for the depth of our commitment to God’s rule of love, which is self-giving. Finally, we ask ourselves what the voice to which we are responding is calling us to do, and to be.

Friends, we are now in the time of year after Easter, that is: after Jesus’ resurrection, but before the descent of the Holy Spirit, which we will remember and celebrate at Pentecost. Now is the time to take soundings and to pray about our commitment to Christ, and to his beloved community called, humankind. Having listened and heard God’s voice of love, I pray we will all follow faithfully and with thanksgiving. Amen.