

May 11, 2014

TEXT: John 10:1-10

TITLE: Voice Recognition

For a moment, think of the ways you use the Internet today. Whether with a home computer, laptop, Smartphone or tablet, many of us use the Internet to check our e-mail, order things online, check our credit card balance, pay bills, request a book from the library, and on and on. But the one screen I seldom like to see is the one that says "Please enter your Username and Password." If I don't visit that site very often, I groan and ask myself, "What's my password?" If you're like me, you tend to have only a couple passwords that you use for all the various websites. "But which password is this one? Is it 6 or 8 letters long? Is anything capitalized? And where is that scrap of paper on which I wrote down all my passwords? It's usually right here by my computer." Have you ever had that conversation with yourself?

The recent Internet virus Heartbleed prompted many of us to change our passwords and likely caused most of us to wish there was some other way to access the Internet that didn't involve passwords. Lots of tech companies have been thinking this same thing and one of the solutions they are exploring involves biometrics. Biometrics use some aspect of our physiology as our password – like our fingerprint, a scan of our retina, or more commonly, our voice. Voice recognition software is becoming quite advanced now. Some computer companies are exploring having you use a verbal password – a combination of a set phrase spoken by you that unlocks your computer. Now, you still have to remember the phrase and pray you don't get laryngitis, but it appears to be a better system than the one we currently use.

This version of computer biometrics is actually built around something that is very old. We have long known that animals recognize one another by their voices. Calves in huge herds of cattle can find their mother by hearing her plaintive "moo." Sheep and goats can locate their wandering babies despite hearing a cacophony of bleats and "baas." This concept is so well-known that Jesus referred to it when he tried to explain the special relationship between God and us. He said "the sheep know the shepherd's voice, the one who calls them by name and whom they will follow to safety and abundant life." It was a familiar figure of speech for his Jewish audience. They knew the scriptures, such as the 23rd Psalm, professed "the Lord is my shepherd." They also knew the warnings in Ezekiel 34 in which bad shepherds were those faith leaders who only looked after their own needs and neglected their flock. Their bad example caused the sheep to wander or fall prey to all the dangers of the world. It was the good shepherds whose voice could be trusted and who led the sheep to good pasture and safe lodging.

For biometrics to work, your computer has to be programmed to recognize your voice. You have to say your password several times to the computer so that it can identify your unique verbal voiceprint. The computer is then programmed to hear and respond only to your voice. The good news of the gospel reminds us that we are each programmed to know God's voice. There is a built-in capacity for each of us to respond to the ways of the Spirit. Faith is not a totally alien concept; it is not a foreign idea that has no connection to who we fundamentally are. No – all of us, all people, have the capacity to be in relationship with God, to hear Christ's voice. The Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin once said, "We are primarily spiritual beings having a human experience, not human beings having a spiritual experience." For all of our fixation on biology, we need to remember that we are body and soul; that we are programmed to recognize the voice of our loving God and of Christ the Good Shepherd.

Why is this important to remember? Well, think again about computer biometrics. No matter what type of fancy technology we devise to protect our computer information, someone will try to find a way to defeat it, right? In this world there is light and darkness, good and evil, innocent computer screens that require our credit card information and diabolical imitation screens that exist to steal that same information. We need to remember that, at the core of our being, we are programmed to recognize the voice of the loving Lord who calls us by name – who knows us and goes to great lengths, even the Good Friday cross, to heal our brokenness and lead us into true life. For there are thieves and bandits all around us, and sometimes within us, who seek to lead us astray or into danger. That is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."

Now some would argue with me about whether we are truly spiritual beings programmed to respond to the call of Christ. Philosophical atheists would reverse de Chardin's equation and insist that we are only human beings who have been misguided to believe we have spiritual experiences. They would ask us to trust in the powers of human reason, as if our rational minds are all we need to sort out right and wrong, good and evil. At the moment I am reading Ron Stone's excellent book about Reinhold Niebuhr, who many of you remember was an important German-American theologian during the years of the Second World War. The world struggled then to decide what to do in response to Hitler's Nazism, with some people arguing that everything will work out just fine if we just act reasonably and rationally. Niebuhr argued back that human beings are simply not logical creatures – not because they do not know logic, but because they are capable of standing outside the system of logic and thus making it the servant of their interests. He said, "Man is more than reason. That is why his actions are usually less than reasonable."¹

It's true – we are more than just flesh and blood, and we are guided by instincts beyond logic and reason, which means we are often unreasonable, undependable, and sadly unworthy. If we are programmed to hear the voice of

God, it is for the simple reason that we need to hear the voice of God. If we have the innate spiritual capacity to trust something deeper than reason and imperfect human logic, it is because we need to trust something, someone, deeper than reason and logic. We are sheep who need a shepherd.

Jesus may have used a figure of speech to get this idea across, but he touched on something profound that merits our daily reflection. We are made to hear Christ's voice because we need that voice to guide us amidst the cacophony of noise and distractions of moral bandits all around us. That is why we gather in church, so that we sit, worship and serve amidst other people who have nothing in common with us except this shared need to hear Christ's voice. That is why we invite others to join us in church, because we all share this need and will only find what we most deeply seek in life when we gather in community around the Good Shepherd.

Richard Rohr has argued that the church has put far too much effort into arguing about metaphysics ("What is reality?") and not enough effort into epistemology ("How did you come to know what you believe to be true reality?").² Rohr says that far too often, reality for us comes from our small minds' understanding and our limited personal experiences – what we think life is like – and where God fits into the whole picture. Yet reality is always much more than what we've experienced or what we imagine it to be. Faith is also much more than our limited experiences or the partial answers we've come up with on our own. Pope Francis recently said that if people say with total certainty that they have met God and yet they are not "touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. If one has the answers to all the questions – that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties. We must be humble."³

I like that phrase – "You must leave room for the Lord." You must remember each day that Christ is calling us by name. That we are programmed to hear that voice, which is a "voice recognition" biometric built into us as an expression of God's eternal grace and mercy. That we need to hear that voice, lest we go astray in this life because of thieves and bandits without, pride and prejudice within. Because when we leave room for God, listen and follow the Lord, we come to understand what reality truly is; and in that humble, faithful understanding, together with one another in Christ Jesus we will have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God.

¹ Ron Stone, Politics and Faith, 2012, p. 138; quoting an article from *Christianity and Society*.

² Antonio Spadaro, A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis, 2013; response offered by Richard Rohr, p. 93.

³ *Ibid*, p. 95.