

John 10:27-28

This past Friday morning the news team members of a St. Louis television station were wishing one of their own a Happy Mother's Day. "Your first one!" another said to her. She smiled and replied, "Does it count?" because her baby was not born just yet. I'm happy to say that they all assured her that yes, it did count.

And how right they were. For the baby in the womb makes a woman a mother. Even the baby knows this. For nine months he does not know what his mother looks like or the touch of her hand upon his cheek. He does not know what it's like to be held in her arms and to nurse at her breast. But one thing he does know is the sound of her voice. He hears this sound continuously, for where she goes he goes, so when she speaks, he is there to hear.

And so when he is born into this big, wide world with so many sounds, so many images, so much activity going on all around him, he finds comfort and assurance in one thing - his mother's voice is still there. The doctor places him next to her beating heart and the warmth of her body. And as he lies there all snuggled up, she speaks to him gently, lovingly, and he knows that all is well. For he has learned to love and trust the voice of his mother.

Before a baby is born, there is another voice he learns to hear: the voice of Jesus. What does His voice sound like? It's the voice of the baby's mother reading Holy Scripture aloud so that he can hear from his place in her womb. It's the voice of his father and mother praying the Lord's Prayer together, and he is right there listening. It's the voice of the pastor in church speaking the Word of God, preaching, and absolving sin. And because his mother carries her baby to church with her in her womb, he is there to listen.

"My sheep hear My voice," says Jesus. And how wonderful that this hearing begins even before birth. And so on the day of his baptism, the voice the baby hears is one he recognizes; one he loves and trusts: the voice of Jesus.

As a baby grows he learns that his mother's voice means protection, food, and love. As he keeps hearing the voice of Jesus as he grows and matures, he learns to associate that voice with Divine love, tenderness, pity, and forgiveness. No wonder Jesus says, *"My sheep follow Me."* They follow His voice for they learn to connect all good things with the sound of Jesus' voice.

But what happens when a baby, now more fully grown, does something to disobey his mother? He may fear that his mother will reject him. He may hide from her and try to cover up his wrong. This is also true of Jesus' sheep. Keep in mind that He never says, "My sheep are without sin... My sheep always obey Me." No. In fact He gives His life for His sheep because we are great sinners full of disobedience. And He knows this. *"I know My sheep,"* He says. He knows your faults and mine. But He does not reject you for them. He forgives you.

One of the beautiful windows behind me depicts Jesus holding one of His sheep. Jesus, of course, looks radiant and flawless. And so He is. But notice, so does the sheep. It looks beautiful, a perfect white, completely innocent. Last week I took a closer look. That little sheep is not a perfect white. There are what appear to be imperfections, flaws, smudges perhaps. And this

presents a more accurate picture. Jesus does not hold you close to Him because you are a perfect little sheep. He holds you close and wraps you in His arms because you need His pity and mercy, for you, like me, are a flawed sheep. You have smudges in your past, as do I. Some of these are atrocious. They make us unfit to be called God's sheep. For we have acted more like the devil's flock.

And yet here you are this morning once again listening to the voice of Jesus. Have you ever heard that voice telling you to leave Him and just go away? Have you ever heard that voice tell you that you are not His sheep because of those deep, dark sins in your past? Never! And you never will. "*My sheep hear My voice,*" He says, and His voice tells you just the opposite. That you always belong to Him; that nothing you have done disqualifies you from being His sheep. He died on the cross for it all. He forgives you, each one of you, of every sin in your life.

Sometimes sheep have doubts about this. And when they are disobedient they hide from the voice of Jesus, just like a young, disobedient child wanting to hide from his mother. We have sheep here who do that. You and I have done that. We don't have everything in our life under control. Things get messy. We become scattered, even broken.

But we always have Jesus. He has you in His loving hands and nothing, He says, can snatch you away from Him. Nothing you have done. Nothing the devil throws against you. Nothing can take you away from Jesus. You are His sheep forever. His voice keeps reminding you of this. When you stray, He recalls you. When you hide, He finds you. When you fall, He lifts you up in His arms just like the picture in the window.

And what He gives you is sure and certain. "*My sheep,*" He says, "*will never perish.*" Your place with Him in heaven does not depend on how good a sheep you are. Jesus gave you a place in heaven with Him even before He created you. Purely out of grace. He chose you to be His own. He called you to be His sheep. And this is why you hear His voice today. This is why you follow His voice. This is why you love Jesus. All this is not easy to understand. Yet you believe it to be true because you are one of His sheep. Amen.