

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
at the Burial Office of Catherine Morrison Fellers  
on 30 April 2007

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life.*

There are times when things in life connect. Some people call them coincidences, while others, like me, sense this is what life is like when God's reality overlaps with our awareness. In any event, there are two of these overlappings, as we gather to give thanks to God for the life of Cath Fellers and to do the hard-but-essential work of commending her to the Lord and, finally, burying her.

One overlap that I never recognized before, even though Cath had talked to me about her funeral arrangements, is that Cath and my own mother were born on the same day, in the same year. In that connection, I am confronted with an awareness of what it will be like to bury my own mother and what Chip and Rita face today, as they bury their mother.

The other connection stems from the fact that the lessons that Cath chose for this, her burial rite, contain the same gospel reading that the church-at-large read yesterday in Sunday services. Yesterday was "Good Shepherd Sunday," the mid-point in the Easter season. This is the time when we always are treated to the imagery of Jesus as our Good Shepherd, who in his rising from the grave provides us with the ultimate shepherding and guidance: namely, revealing that with God, death no longer defines our lives.

Those of us who knew Cath would not be surprised in the least by the fact that she showed up at my study door one day to adjust her funeral plans. In my notes from that meeting, dated almost exactly six years ago, Cath changed the lessons she wanted read to include this passage from St. John's gospel. Cath somehow overcame her natural shyness to tell me what she wanted done! And for those of you who may not have met Cath, one was never in doubt as to what Cath thought or wanted.

While Cath's directness was not always appreciated, I found it helpful. There were no code words with Cath that one had to translate. You knew where you stood with her in an instant.

And so, in the gospel lesson Cath chose for her funeral, we hear Jesus explaining to his disciples – in no uncertain terms -- who he is to them and – by extension – to us. These words seem to sum up his message concisely. "My sheep know my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life."

At the heart of this statement, this confession of identity, this expression of

relationship, I find the demand to listen and to respond. In its essence, life is relationship. Everything else is detail. If we can recognize that life emerges, not in solitude or certainly in isolation or in brokenness, but as we connect, as we recognize that it is what is between us that is most real, then there is a need – or as I have put it a demand – to listen to more than ourselves and to respond to more than ourselves.

Relationship is the DNA of what is real. Relationship also lies at the heart of what we easily call religion, certainly in what Christianity is about. For the fundamental nature of God lies in the Holy One's creativity; and the apex of the Creator of heaven and earth's efforts emerges in terms of relationship – from the tiniest sub-atomic particles to galaxies in their courses, and most explicitly in the cross and resurrection. In this truth, no relationships are more important – or more challenging – than the connections human beings share.

One of my most significant mentors pointed out that discerning how close to get to one another or how far to stay away is the human struggle. Animals seem instinctively to know how to figure this out. For instance, have you ever heard of a flock of geese colliding in air? Have you ever heard of a shoal of fish bumping into one another? Never. They instinctively know how close to get and how far away to stay in their relationships. It is humanity who struggles with the right spacing, and we struggle because instincts are not enough for men and women. We must choose the spacing, and therein lies the problem – and, I would suggest, the genesis of our pain.

One person's level of intimacy is another's suffocation. One person's needed distance is another's abandonment. We must choose, but how can we choose helpfully, responsibly, creatively?

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life.”

Just the other day, my colleague, Furman Buchanan, mentioned four things one needs to say in the face of death – death being a sobering reality test that we are all in relationship. The first is to say “thank you.” The second is “I forgive you.” The third is “Please forgive me.” The fourth is “I love you.”

My point in all this is that there are always lots of voices in our lives. They all call to us for attention. Some are much more demanding than others, but only one voice leads to life, especially life that will not be held hostage by fear and death. And that voice belongs to the Good Shepherd. His voice not only brings new life; his voice guides us to that position, to that spacing with God, with one another, and with ourselves, where we can flourish and do so together.

It is not always easy to say to one another: “I love you.” For we have all done our share to ruin the loving space that is meant to be between us. We have all been hurt and hurt others by our foolish manipulation of the sacred space that God

means to have between us, to the extent that it is not only hard to say “I love you;” we can at times find it impossible to do so.

And yet, we hunger for that loving space with God, with one another, and with ourselves. That voice, that expression of deep yearning and need must never be allowed to be muffled or silenced or profaned. And the most direct way any of us can take to speak those liberating, generative words is, first, to recognize that none of us who have met Cath Fellers – or anyone else, for that matter – remains the same. Such is the power of who we are and how we are connected. We shape one another by our presence.

So, the first step in reshaping our lives as God would have them is to say: “thank you.” Then, within an attitude of gratitude, we quickly realize our need – our need – to ask for forgiveness for how poorly we have handled the space of relationship. And to seal the need for forgiveness, we must swiftly offer it to the other, as well.

This is not a recipe for making things all better. Rather, this is a way forward from brokenness, pain, and frustration over the improper space that is and has been between us all. This is a way ahead, toward the life the Good Shepherd calls us to, and we call that life “eternal.” It is what life with God is like and it is also the kind of life we need and cannot give to ourselves.

The thing about death is that it calls us to sobriety about a whole spectrum of things, not the least of which is our need to listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd, who calls us by name and asks us to follow in order that we may have lasting life. It seems to me that the way to listen and follow the Good Shepherd – especially in the face of fear and death -- is to employ the discipline of living “thank you;” “forgive me;” “I forgive you;” “I love you.” In this way, we can begin to keep the right amount of space between us so that God’s space can overshadow us, heal us, and make us new.

In Cath’s death, such conversation has become more complicated. We no longer have the ability to speak face-to-face with her, but the interesting thing is that in death everything changes but not the fact that we are connected.

Relationships are eternal. Listening to the voice of Life and responding with those four ingredients is a recipe for salvation – a word that means “health and wholeness.” Health and wholeness (salvation) is what we need most. It is also what God gives in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We ask for God’s blessing on Cath Fellers and on one another. May we speak gratitude and forgiveness and love, not only with our lips but in our lives and, thereby, keep and honor the space that is both between us and sacred to us.

Amen.