

Many years ago, when the Internet was still new and smartphones hadn't been invented, I attended a technology conference entitled *Advertising and the Internet*. We were told that the average person received roughly 5,000 messages a day. The presenter said that included billboards, TV, radio, magazines and even comments from family and friends. The goal by 2015 was to raise that number to 15,000 messages a day. How well do you think they're doing?

Those numbers might not reflect everyone's experience accurately, but I think we can agree that we're all subjected to an enormous number of competing messages. How do we decide which are worthy of our attention and which are not?

Both the first reading and the gospel today can help us discern which are the most important ones. Both scripture passages were written during times when conflicting messages were circulating about who Jesus was and about the significance of his life and death. How could anyone back then have decided which were worthy of attention and which were not? Curiously, both scripture passages tell us that the flock back then just *knew*, and suggest to us that it's true today as well. There's something that allows us to discern reliably what makes a message worthy of our attention. Let's take a look and see what it might be.

We'll start by considering the message itself. The complete Christian message is described in more detail than anyone would probably ever want to know in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Happily, we don't have to read the whole thing to find out what it is about the message that makes it possible for us to discern that what we're heeding is indeed the voice of the Good Shepherd. Paragraph 25 of the *Catechism* says “The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends....so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.”¹ Clearly, if the messages we hear are about love, then it's the Good Shepherd's voice we're

1 CCC, #25

hearing.

That's surely a good start, but as the famous Canadian Catholic academic Marshall McLuhan pointed out years ago, the medium is the message, and that's as true of the Christian message as it is of any other. Messages are about more than just their content. To grasp the entire message we need to know the source of the message and be aware of the messenger's intent.

Most of the commercial messages we hear come at us from mass media sources, and are intended to manipulate our behavior, whether we're aware that we're being manipulated or not. If you're curious, you can read Vance Packard's 1957 marketing classic *The Hidden Persuaders*, which describes the eight hidden motivators advertisers use to get us to buy things, by appealing subliminally to the instinctual desires and fears of the ego. It isn't pretty.

In contrast, messages about love are always gentle invitations, with no hint of coercion or manipulation. The source, wrote the famous Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, is always God, but you and I are, among other things, the voice of God. You and I are the medium God has chosen to deliver God's messages of love. Each of us is some part of the experience of God of everyone that we've ever met. Study, worship and prayer certainly help tune up that package and our ability to deliver it, but the capability God gave us to be his voice has its origin deep within the loving and creative relationship God has with each and every one of us.

Let me tell you a little story. Several years ago, a group of us were sitting around my friend Ernie's fire pit after a really good barbecue. As we enjoyed each other's company in the warmth of the fire against the coolness of the evening, the experience of hearing the Good Shepherd's voice came up. We all agreed that it was pretty easy to hear the voice of God in our mutual friendship that evening, but our friend Sean said "I think it goes deeper than that."

We asked him to explain and he told us: “I remember when my son Tommy was coming into the world. Cindy and I used to talk and sing to 'The Lump,' as we called him before he was born. I thought it was silly, but Cindy used to ask 'How do you know what he can hear or not?’”

“Anyway, when he was born, they wiped him off, wrapped him up in a blanket and handed him to me, screaming bloody murder and eyebrows at the vertical. Nobody told me what I was supposed to do, so I just put my face up right next to his, gave him a kiss and began singing 'Happy Birthday' to him. They say babies can't see much, but he gave me the longest stare anyone has ever given me and then stopped crying, as if I'd turned off a switch.”

“He was as tiny and light as a bird, but I could feel him relax in my arms, and his eyebrows returned to normal. It hit me then that he knew who I was and that he was safe. I was his and he was mine and that was all that mattered. It was like the way it is sometimes after receiving communion. Cindy and I think that somehow as I sang to him, he recognized my voice from the time before he was born.”

“For me, hearing God's voice is like that. It feels like I'm recalling being loved from the time before I was even born. Tonight, with all of us together like this, I can feel God speaking to me through you, just like that.” We all got kind of quiet just then, and we all knew what Sean said was true. In the warmth of our little circle of love, we knew we were each syllables being uttered from the mouth of God to one another.

Amid all the clutter of messages that assault us today, you and I can reliably pick out the ones that resonate with the sound of the voice of the Good Shepherd. They're the messages that are saturated with the love God has had for each and every one of us from all eternity. They're the messages that are intended only to invite us gently into deeper, increasingly more trusting relationship with him, without coercion or manipulation. They are the messages of love.