

“Who Are You?”

John 10:22-30

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As I was pondering this week’s scripture text, the song “Who Are You” by the band *The Who* kept going through my mind. I’m guessing that many, if not most of you know either the band or the song. The band has been around for decades, and was most recently the halftime show at the Superbowl. You may also recognize the song as the theme of the TV show *CSI*. The hook of the song is the line, “Who are you? Who who, who who?” This morning’s text asks that same question of Jesus, and in our meditation on that text this morning, we might do well to ask the same question of ourselves.

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Festival of the Dedication, which is the same celebration we now know as Hanukkah. That’s not just a minor detail in the story. The Festival of the Dedication had been started around two hundred years before the time of Jesus, and it celebrated the renewal or rededication of the temple area by Judas Maccabeus after the Seleucids were driven out. So what this festival was all about was the remembrance of a time of victory over oppression – a victory that was led by a messiah-like figure. So, during this Festival of the Dedication, it was fairly natural for the Jews to begin to question whether Jesus might actually be the real messiah – the one that would secure a more permanent victory over their oppressors.

Jesus was walking in the temple during the Festival of the Dedication when some of the people there huddled around him and began to ask him questions. “How long are you going to keep us in suspense?” they asked. “If you are the messiah, tell us plainly!”

Now imagine for a moment what would have been going through Jesus’ mind at this point. He had been around these people for a while now. He had spent time preaching, teaching, healing, performing signs and miracles. What more would he have to do to get them to believe?

Jesus responds by saying, “I’ve told you before, but you didn’t believe me. The miracles I’ve performed in my Father’s name testify to who I am, but you do not believe.” You see, Jesus has no need to testify on his own behalf because his works have already done that. Mohammed Ali claimed to be “The greatest of all time!” but that would have been a hollow claim if he had not followed it up with his winning record. In the same way, Jesus’ claim to be “the way, the truth and the life” would be hollow if he had not lived in a way that was consistent with his claim – if he had not lived in a way that mirrored God.

And so, for us, there is no testimony to our resurrection faith more powerful than doing the works that Jesus did: healing, comforting, freeing, feeding. After all, if Jesus says that his works testify to his identity, will not ours do the same?

In our day, the question posed to us is probably not, "Are you the messiah?" We have a different way of asking the question, "Who are you?" There are those who ask it in this way: "Have you accepted Jesus into your heart?" I believe this question, while important, only gets to half of what is important. Yes, it is vitally important to accept Jesus into your heart, but if you stop there, you're missing the point that Jesus was trying to make.

The story is told of an Amish man who was approached by a Christian evangelist. The evangelist asked him whether or not he had been saved – whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and his Savior. The Amish man replied, "Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything I wanted you to believe. If you really want to know if I've been saved, if you really want to know if Jesus Christ is my Lord and my Savior, here are the names of my banker, my grocer and my farm hands. Ask them if I've been saved."

The people in today's Gospel lesson are saying to Jesus, "Who are you?" That's a good and important question to ask ourselves today. If someone were to ask you, "Who are you?" is your faith a big enough part of your life that your response would have to include, "I'm Christian?" If so, would they be able to tell? Would your co-workers or employees know? What about the person who cuts your hair, or services your car? If someone were to review your finances, would they be able to tell? Another way of thinking about this would be to ponder the old saying that asks: if you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

These are really good and important questions to ask ourselves, but there is a danger in going too far along this line. If we look only to our works as testimony to our Christian identity we might run the risk of concluding that we're not all that Christian after all. And so, it's important to hear this first statement by Jesus not in isolation but rather as intimately connected to what he says next.

In the same breath that Jesus tells his interrogators that his works should testify to the truth of his claim, he also says that they do not believe because they are not his sheep. Jesus says he knows his sheep and will not lose them. This is a really interesting statement that is full of meaning, so I think we need to unpack it a bit.

First, he says that they do not believe because they are not his sheep. This is a pretty tough statement by Jesus. Is he really saying that some people are not his sheep, or in some way outside of his fold? That's the way the sentence reads, even in the original Greek. When we look at the sentence literally, it clearly says that they do not believe because they are not Jesus' sheep. It doesn't say they are not Jesus' sheep because they don't believe. So it might lead one to believe that there are people who Jesus intentionally keeps outside of his flock, or at least there are some that Jesus doesn't feel he needs to tend to as their shepherd.

This is one of those times when I think it's important to look at the fullness of scripture in order to fully understand a particular sentence. When we look at the entirety of the Gospel accounts, it is clear that Jesus intends to reach all people. He consistently talks and eats with all different

kinds of people from all different walks of life and all backgrounds. I see no indication in scripture that Jesus ever tried to keep his message limited to a chosen group of people.

And so, when talking about people who are not his sheep, I think Jesus must be talking about the people who have made the conscious decision not to follow him, despite his efforts to be their shepherd. You see, sheep are animals that follow. They cannot be herded from behind like cattle, they will only follow their leader or their shepherd. They know the unique voice of their shepherd too, so they know who to follow and who not to follow.

Therefore, it makes sense that Jesus would say that some cannot believe in him because they have made the choice not to believe. They are not his sheep because they choose not to be, for whatever reason.

Jesus goes on to say that he knows his sheep and he will not lose them. This is a promise that Jesus knows us and will not let go of us, no matter what we do. Jesus knows who we are and what we need. Jesus promises to be different than what we experience all too often from other people in our lives. Jesus won't leave us or abandon us.

Most of us want deeply to be known by another, don't we? We want to be known because we recognize that unless someone knows us truly they cannot accept us as we are. For that very reason, of course, we are hesitant to be fully known, because we fear rejection. We wonder if anyone will still love us if they know all the deepest secrets about us. Yet Jesus does know us. Jesus knows the good and bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the hopes and fears, the accomplishments and failures, the acts of fidelity and those of betrayal – and Jesus still promises us a relationship with him (and thereby with God) that transcends this world. Jesus knows everything about us, and still chooses to be with us.

Jesus concludes by saying, "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." I believe this sums up the message of today's text fairly well, and it serves as our invitation to Christian discipleship this morning.

Who are we? Are we sheep in Jesus' flock? Are we listening to Jesus' voice? Are we willing to be fully known by Jesus? Are we willing to follow Jesus? Will people know we are followers of Jesus by our actions? If the answer is yes, the promise for us, Jesus says, is eternal life.

By eternal life, I'm not simply suggesting some "pie in the sky in the great by and by" wonderland that comes only after our death. Eternal life is something that can be experienced in the here and now. Eternal life is the promise that we might have life, and have it abundantly. It is the promise of a different way of living in this life, a different way of being in this life. It is not a promise that everything will be rosy, but that we will experience God's presence and grace and love amidst the difficulties we will face in this life. It is the promise that we can experience a peace that passes understanding. It is the promise that the lives we live will make an eternal difference, that our lives will have eternal significance. And yes, when this life is

over, it is the promise that there will be something more – that we can experience eternity in loving relationship with God. This is what eternal life is all about.

This is the good news that Jesus came to proclaim, and it is the good news that we are invited to believe and follow this day, and always.