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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, May 12, 2019
4th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: John 10:22-30
Sermon Title: “Do You Know the Voice of Jesus?”

Theme

Jesus responds to questions about his identity with the remarkable claim that he and the Father are one. Those who understand this are his sheep; they hear his voice, follow, and will never be snatched from his hand.

Text

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,
²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.”

Sermon

Recently I saw a report on the news about a dog that had gotten lost and somehow managed to get several hundred miles away from home before he was adopted by some other family. Eventually, more than a year later if I recall the story, this family took the dog to a vet where it was discovered that the dog had one of those chips imbedded in his coat so that he could be identified. His original owners were notified and arrangements were made to fly the pooch home. The reunion was captured by the local media and broadcast all over the national news. But what was heartrending about the reunion is that when the dog came off the airplane his owners called to him and for perhaps the first time in years he heard his name called by a familiar and loved voice. His tail was wagging and he wanted to lick the faces of his family and all was well once again.

That story came to mind as I read the Gospel Reading for this week. Now, context is important here. Although we are in the fourth Sunday of Easter, on the timeline of Jesus' public ministry he is already in Jerusalem to meet his end.

Jesus has already had his three years of ministry. He has already preached many sermons, performed many signs and miracles, as well as ticked a lot of people off, namely the Jewish religious authority. And on this particular day they were done beating around the bush and so they cornered him and asked him flat out, “²⁴How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

It's an honest question, don't you think? No doubt, there were charlatans in Jesus' day. Quacks and snake oil merchants who preyed on the vulnerability of ignorant people. And although, Jerusalem was the capital city of Judaism, the culture was heavily tainted by their Roman overlords and so other religious influences had undoubtedly made their way throughout the Roman Empire. So for these Jewish leaders, some of whom were probably genuine in their interest in him, to ask him if he was the long awaited Messiah was not uncalled for in my opinion.

In our day, people sometimes ask Christians similar questions. I get asked from time to time. “You're a religious person. Tell me how you Christians can believe...” and away it goes. Has this ever happened to you? People will ask me, “How can you expect anointing someone's forehead with oil and saying prayers to an unseen God to have any affect?” or “How can you believe that what looks like

common bread and wine is actually the body and blood of Jesus and that it has the power to forgive and unite you to each other and God?”

Now I don't know why but Jesus was averse to giving them a straight answer. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is deliberately vague and evasive, especially when it comes to the religious authorities. I suspect that that is because he knew, in ways that he always seemed to know, what was really behind their questions. They did really want to hear him say unequivocally, “Yes, I am the one!” But not because they wanted to worship him. No. They wanted to hear him say it so that they could attack him, discredit him, and be done with him once and for all.

Jesus responded by saying that he had virtually told them what they wanted to know by virtue of his reputation, which he knew they were aware of. ²⁵“The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me.” he said.

The problem is not that they didn't already know the answer to their own question. The problem, as Jesus identified it, is that they were not believers. What he actually said was,

“²⁵The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

There is a problem. And the problem will not be resolved in answering questions. There is no answer that will satisfy the unbeliever. Lack of belief, lack of faith, is the problem. Without faith I can't expect anointing someone's forehead with oil and saying prayers to an unseen God will have any affect. Without faith what looks like common bread and wine *is* actually common bread and wine. And without faith we are powerless to sin, never forgiven and completely unable to be united with each other and God?”

I know just a little about sheep. We used to have some on the farm in Indiana. I think we had them mainly to keep the barn yard mowed down. Our sheep were afraid of us and when we were out they went running in the other direction. That is probably because we tormented them and tried to corner them so we could ride them.

My grandparents owned the farm next to ours and my grandfather also had sheep. He was a kindly old man and he could call his sheep and they would come a running to him. They trusted him, and if he called to them, then it probably meant feeding time.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.” Jesus was speaking metaphorically of course. He was never a shepherd of sheep. But he used this metaphor often because he knew there were a lot of abused and beat down folks out there. And every opportunity he had, he treated them with love and respect and brought them healing and forgiveness and wholeness.

I suspect if you were *not* a person of influence or wealth or power, but rather someone who was poor and disregarded, what Jesus had to say was probably welcome good news. Maybe that’s another way of saying that *they heard his voice and followed him*.

When his followers were in his company they felt like they had value, like they were loved, and not just by Jesus, but he told them that God loved them too. That was not the message they were getting from the Temple and synagogue.

In the Temple they might have been told that they were unclean, not fit to enter. Sacrifice was needed before they could be forgiven of their sins. What? No money for the offering, no animal for sacrifice? Away with you and may God have mercy on your soul!

Jesus’ message was quite a bit different. Jesus brought all that good stuff I mentioned before (love, respect, healing, forgiveness, and wholeness) and one thing I haven’t mentioned yet but that Jesus mentioned in the reading: he also brings eternal life to those who believe in his messiahship and follow his way. A gift well beyond our human comprehension.

Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

Well, it’s a lovely story, but what is the value to us? I’m so glad you asked, because it’s my Raisin’ the Bar Challenge for this week.

I really don’t think things are all that different for us today. I think we live in a culture that is increasingly ambivalent and even hostile to Christianity. Even

among church people we tend to be one way on Sunday with our church friends and another way on Monday with our colleagues at work or Tuesday night on the golf league.

I think most Americans live like we don't really want the Gospel to be true because if it is true then we should be living differently, namely trying to live like Jesus. But we like our excessive lifestyles and whitewash our guilt by sending some change to missionaries who take care of the dirty work for us over there. If what I am saying is cutting to close to the bone for you, just know I am not much different from you.

Fortunately we Christians worship a God that is more willing to forgive than we are willing to receive that same forgiveness. But to not see the meaning for our lives in this story would be to live in the illusion of cheap grace.

Jesus said his sheep know his voice and follow him. That should have an impact on our lives. Things should be different. Our lives should be different than the ones lifted up by our culture. We know better. We should do better. We have to do better.

But even when we try and fail, our Lord is there to forgive and tend. And we have nothing to fear because in Christ we are eternal beings. Not someday. Not just when we die. But already, said Jesus. “²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.” Did you hear that? We have eternal life! We will never perish!

That lost dog I told you about had no idea why he was getting on an airplane. He had no idea his people were looking for him. He simply had to trust that everything was going to be OK. And in the end, he heard a familiar voice. He was home, and all was well.

The same can be said for those who are faithful. They hear the good shepherd's voice and follow him.

Prayer

God and Father of our Lord and Shepherd, we confess to you that the drone of the world makes it difficult to hear his voice. But we also confess that we like it that way. We are comfortable in our ignorance and count on your grace. Forgive us.

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Clear away the noise of the culture so that we may hear his voice. And give us the strength to follow. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Shepherd. Amen