

Sermon on John 10:22-30  
Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 17, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

In this present generation there appears to be a lot of confusion around identity. I'm not talking about gender identity or sexual orientation – although there is that, for some. But I am speaking here of identity around *faith* – who we are in relation to God, and to one another (as a people, a church, or community of faith). This is a universal, existential question – not one only for you here at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer! Everyone is asking these kinds of questions: *who am I? Who are you? Who is God? Who is Jesus? Am I a Christian – what IS a Christian? What is the Church? Do I really believe what the Church teaches?*

The answers seem to run across a large spectrum. There are those who identify themselves strongly to a particular faith or denomination, saying “I am a Christian – or I am a Muslim – or I am a Jew, or a Buddhist – or I am a Roman Catholic, or a Lutheran. Some say they are atheists or agnostics, or undecided, seeking God but haven't “found” him yet. There are those who say they are “spiritual, but not religious” (which is real trendy these days) – and there are those who say they are “Nones” (when asked for religious affiliation they check the box marked “none”). If someone asked you, what would you say? Sometimes I say that I am a child of God seeking to become a human being (I take this from a conversation actor Kevin Costner had with a wise Lakota elder in *Dances with Wolves*)! But to be more specific, I guess you'd have to say that I am on a path as a person of faith (a pastor) in the Lutheran tribe of the Christian Church seeking to follow Jesus as best I can as a disciple – and discovering what that means! I hope your answer isn't as complicated! Perhaps it's *more* complicated!

So in today's gospel lesson, we find ourselves hearing a portion of the conversation Jesus had with the Jewish leaders as he walked in the Temple of Jerusalem, in the portico of Solomon. It's a running conversation that had been continuing since chapter seven in John, when Jesus left Galilee for the Festival of Booths in Jerusalem, so that people in Judea could hear him and see the works that he was doing, signs that Jesus was the Messiah so long expected. Some of this conversation was the normal questioning that happens in Judaism, when a rabbi makes a statement and then other rabbis and people of faith ask questions, and debate the meaning of scripture. Other parts of the conversation were more hostile questions and challenges from the religious leaders – Pharisees and scribes, who were threatened or exposed by Jesus' teachings. By the end of this chapter 10, some of them were so upset that they were ready to take up stones to stone him in response to his words, and some wanted to arrest him for blasphemy. It didn't happen – Jesus

left Jerusalem across the Jordan to the wilderness of John the Baptist, until the day he raised Lazarus from the dead, in Bethany. After that, Jesus returned to Jerusalem once more on Palm Sunday, and we know what happened then.

The passage we read today centers around the questions that Jewish leaders had about Jesus' identity, seeking to trip him up by making a religious statement or claim that they could accuse him with. So they gathered around him and asked him, "Why do you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus' response was that he had been telling them all along, and showing them by his works, who he was, but they didn't get it – they didn't believe him, because they weren't part of his flock, they weren't his *sheep*. For they had taken his teaching about the loving mercy of God, and the relationship that God, whom Jesus called "Father", has called us all into – everyone in the world – and turned it into a hostile argument for debate, a threat against the faith in God which Jesus shared with them! Then Jesus spoke some of the most comforting, inviting words in all of scripture that you and I will ever hear: "*My sheep hear 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.*"

Do you hear it - the inviting voice of Jesus in these words? Jesus invites you and me to hear his voice, promises to recognize you and me when we call, and to never abandon us. Earlier in chapter 10 Jesus compared the shepherd who gives his life for the sheep with the thieves and bandits who run away, leaving the sheep to the wolves. The sheep know the voice of their true shepherd. It was a thinly veiled criticism of the religious leaders, who were failing their people. Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep...I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, so that there will be one flock, one shepherd."

And there you have it. At the core of what Jesus was saying is that isn't so much about what people *believe*, or can be convinced to believe by argument. It is *who cares about them, and knows them and loves them* – that's who people will follow. People seek a God who cares for them, and a Savior who knows their name, who would even risk – no, give his life, to bring us life in return.

Today there is way too much discussion and debate around what people believe, whether it is "correct" or reasonable. Too often this is how we interpret this text, and preachers try to preach "correct" and solid doctrine. In this gospel text we too often focus on the inability of the Pharisees and scribes (the Jewish leaders) to believe that Jesus could be the Messiah or speak the truth of God. Over the centuries Christian preachers focused on their hostility, their refusal to accept Jesus' truths, and their plot to have Jesus arrested and killed. And we know where that led – to centuries of hatred and revenge against all the Jewish people – a flame of hate that

has never been totally extinguished, because we preachers don't know what to do with these texts.

When we focus on what people should believe about Jesus, we make a litmus test of the faith. What belief is Christian, what is not? Debate over what is correct belief about Jesus resulted in the writing of creeds, statements of belief, on which early Christian bishops (all male) voted on what was core to Christian faith – what was true faith, and what was heresy, and we have taught that ever since. All well and good, if you believe every word, but then there are some of those sticky parts – like the “virgin birth”, or that the Holy Spirit “proceeded from the Father AND the Son – which has divided the Church east from west. Today we have other disagreements around gender and sexual orientation, or the ordination of women, which continue to divide us (maybe north from south)! So why do we make a test out of belief, to divide us into insiders and outsiders, rather than simply teaching that faith is about a loving God who desires mercy and to give us life forever – inviting us to open our hearts to trust in such a God, and to follow Jesus!

So I believe that the faith which Jesus invites us into is not about specific doctrines or creeds of the Church at its heart. At the center is the *relationship of trust* which God so keenly wants to have with you, with me, and the whole world that God has made – for every human being is a child of God, every living creature is a creature of God, worthy of love and care. In this world that often confuses us, brings us pain, and sometimes, frankly terrifies us, Jesus speaks to us like a shepherd speaking lovingly of his own flock of sheep. Jesus invites you and me to hear his voice, because he knows you, and to follow him. For Jesus promises to give you eternal life, that he will never let you go, or let anyone snatch you out of his hand. That's the real gospel, today as it has been always.

In a world where so many children are hungry or without a home in this United States; with so many refugees around the world, made homeless by war; where so many are victimized by domestic violence; when people are fearful of being stopped once again by the police and police are afraid of dangerous neighborhoods and situations; when college students wonder if there will be a job after graduation, loaded down with debt; when people are fearful of the diagnosis of their medical condition and whether they can afford treatment. We seek in faith someone - God(?) -whom we can trust, who will always love us and give us comfort and mercy – hope and new life in our despair! We're not looking just for correct doctrines and right answers – we are looking for hope in our hopelessness! And we find this hope in the words of our Lord who calls you and me by name, whose voice we recognize, who simply asks us to follow, and find life – even in the midst of death!

Last Tuesday, several of us from Redeemer gathered at Leigh Chapel at Episcopal Church Home to remember our sister in faith, Cecilia Becker. She had died just three weeks ago, a day after Easter, from cancer. It was a very diverse

community of faith that morning. Some introduced themselves as friends from a knitting and crocheting group of which Cecilia was part. Some were close friends who had known Cecilia for years, or lived at Dale Street Place. Some had only known her for a few months, from the time she moved into hospice care. Others were staff from Episcopal Homes, the chaplain, and of course, Redeemer members and me. We shared stories about Cecilia, her friends spoke of their grief in losing her to cancer, we read scripture, sang hymns, and prayed. One of those prayers was the Lord's Prayer, which we said by memory, and together we recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the King James Version. Everyone knew it by heart! It was a comfort to all of us to say these words – “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...” and have them all be words that we have known from childhood. You can join me. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me...surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

This is why we follow Jesus, and call him our shepherd. He walks with us through the valleys and hills of our lives, and guides us from death to life. He knows our name, and we are his. We are the sheep of his flock – we are the Church of Jesus Christ, and we find it a strength and a comfort when we can say this! So rise up, my friends, and follow our risen Lord, who knows your voice, who sees into your heart, and invites you to come and follow him, to the abundant life in God which Christ has promised, and the eternal life which is ours through faith! Thanks be to God! Amen.