

Sermon for April 17, 2016

John 10:22-30 "Good Shepherd Sunday"

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, our Lord and Master who loves us beyond the limits of our imagination. Amen

You may recall that two weeks ago, I gave you the opportunity to submit questions or concerns that you might have relative to your journey in faith. You wrote them on small pieces of paper and put them in the offering basket. I was very pleased that so many of you took advantage of the chance to give voice to your questions.

I enjoyed reading them very much. As I had anticipated, they were all over the map.

- Deep theological questions.
- Questions about the afterlife.
- Concerns about friends and loved ones in difficult situations.
- Questions about the efficacy of prayer.
- Questions about congregational life.
- Concerns about relationships with those who are Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist.
- Questions about sin, guilt and forgiveness.
- Questions about the Biblical story of creation.
- Concerns about changes in culture and organized religion.
- Concerns about the younger generation.
- Questions about our congregation's public witness of welcome to everyone.
- And last but not least, all kinds of questions about Jesus...everything from his identity as God, the virgin birth and Christ's resurrection from the dead...to..."How tall was Jesus? How did his hair stay so brown? What kind of shampoo did he use? Did he like buffalo wings? Could he jump high?"

Yes, indeed, everything from the ridiculous to the sublime. For the most part, your questions and your concerns were clearly rooted in a desire to be honest with God, to grow in faith, to gain clarity, and to find peace. I found your questions to be genuine, sincere, probing, serious and faithful. Thank you for your courage and your determination. If, by the way, you should ever need to talk with me about your concerns, your hopes, your doubts, I would be honored to help.

In today's gospel reading, questions are asked of Jesus...but as you may have noticed, we're not exactly sure what's motivating these questions. Are they genuine questions or are they adversarial? Are they sincere or are they inherently antagonistic?

What we do know is that Jesus was strolling through the temple in Jerusalem during the celebration of Hanukkah, when a group of Jewish leaders circled around him and asked: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Now I'm no Greek expert, but I'm led to believe by those who are that what the Jewish leaders really said was more like: "How long will you continue to annoy us? If you are the Messiah, tell us straight out...in no uncertain terms!"

If that's the tone and substance of their questions, then it's clear that the leaders of the Jewish establishment were out to trap Jesus. This was no polite conversation. This was an effort to bait and condemn the upstart rabbi from Nazareth.

No matter their intention, Jesus' answer is critical. The Jewish leaders' request, "Tell us plainly!" calls for an unambiguous answer to a straightforward question: "Do you or don't you fit into our understanding of the Messiah?"

Jesus' answer is fascinating.

First of all, he tells them that he's already answered this question before...in other things he's said to them and done in their presence, but they have not believed what they've heard and seen. Why not? Well, says, Jesus, they are not his sheep...that is, they are not among the faithful who have been led to believe that Jesus is Lord. They do not have the ears, the eyes, the heart to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. But, for those who do believe, those who recognize the Good Shepherd's voice, those who understand Jesus to be their master, they need not be anxious or worried or fearful...ever. Jesus says of them, "No one can snatch them out of my hand."

Despite their nastiness and their skepticism, Jesus patiently explains to the Jewish leaders that his works are one in the same as God's works. Why is this significant? Well, New Testament scholar Gail O'Day puts it this way: "Jesus is not saying that he and God are one person, nor even of one nature or essence. Rather, he is saying that he and God are united in the work that they do. It is impossible to distinguish Jesus' work from God's work, because Jesus shares fully in God's work." (NIB, Vol. IX, p. 677)

Therefore, when Jesus says in verse 30 that "The Father and I are one," he is telling the Jewish leaders and everyone else that he "shares in God's work and power. His unity with God thus provides the answer to the Messiah question in verse 24; Jesus is both **more than** and **other than** traditional expectations for the Messiah. His power is not that of a political liberator who will restore Israel; it is the very power of God. God shares with Jesus God's eschatological power over life, death and judgement." (NIB, Vol. IX, p. 677)

In effect, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "You'll have to make your own judgements about my being the Messiah. I can only tell you that the Father and I are one...he is in me and I am in him. You may not understand or accept that, but my sheep certainly do."

And then, as you might guess, in the very next verse of John's Gospel, the verse just after our brief lesson, the leaders of the Jewish establishment all picked up stones and were prepared to stone Jesus to death. Quite clearly, they had gotten the answer they had hoped for with their deceitful question.

Well, my friends, questions are indeed important. And while the Jewish leaders used their questions to reinforce their hatred and justify their prejudices, Jesus seems to have been more concerned about the questions of those who call him Shepherd.

Can you keep us safe? Can you assure us that all will be well? Can you help us with our grief? Can you give us peace in the midst of our uncertainties?

I believe that these are the questions that Jesus was really addressing on that day long ago in the temple. To his sheep, to you and me, Jesus was saying, "I will never abandon you. I will hold you in my arms and never let you go. Whoever you are...and whatever fear or anxiety you harbor about the life you're leading...whatever grief or loss has rocked your existence, I tell you, 'God's love for you is undying, unconditional and unyielding.'"

"No matter how crazy or difficult or stressful or scary your life is, God has chosen you, loves you, and accompanies you...through all of life and even through death into the new life which God offers you and everyone." (David Lose, "In the Meantime," Easter 4C, April 12, 2016)

"No one can snatch you out of God's hands." No one. Period. Amen.