

Year C Easter 4 The Good Shepherd John 10 22 to 30

This Sunday is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In the Gospel story today, we hear Jesus telling us that he is our shepherd since we are his sheep.

This is, for us, an important image of Jesus that we carry with us as Christians – Christ as our Shepherd is part of his identity for us. Today, and throughout John's Gospel, Jesus' identity is hotly debated. What does this have to do with us? We know who he is, don't we?

When we hear from Jesus today, he has been in Jerusalem for quite some time already. He has been teaching frequently in the temple complex and his teachings have prompted a lot of discussion about who he is, where he has come from, and what authority he has to be teaching in the first place. This discussion has resulted in some divisions among those listening to him. The different groups have most definitely NOT agreed to disagree, as the saying goes.

Some of Jesus' listeners believe he is the Messiah, others believe he is possessed by a demon, while still others think he is a blasphemer against God and deserves to die. What we hear today is actually part 2 of the Good Shepherd discourse. Jesus has already been trying to explain to the people and, more importantly, to the Jewish religious leadership, that he is the one, true shepherd of those who want to live with God in God's kingdom. In the first part of this discussion – that we don't hear today – Jesus makes a few very important points. He tells us that, as our shepherd, he is also the gate into the safety and abundant pastures of the kingdom. He warns us that there are others who *say* they provide the way in but those people are thieves who only cause death and destruction. Jesus is the one who gives life in abundance for the sheep who listen to *his* voice. His mission is to

gather all of those sheep together into one flock with one shepherd and, to do this, he will lay down his life for the sheep.

These things he says results in the division I mentioned. Some of the people and religious leaders think he's nuts and has a demon. Others counter this by saying, "These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (John 10:21).

Today we hear from the religious leaders who are tired of this ongoing argument about who Jesus really is and they ask him to put an end to the debate. They say to him, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." The problem is, of course, that Jesus has told them and they do not believe him. If Jesus Christ himself stood in front of the people and religious leaders and told them he was the Messiah, encouraging them to believe so that they would have eternal life, and they did not believe *him* then that sure doesn't bode well for us now without Jesus physically here.

But Jesus does something very important for us to notice at this point. To help them believe, he holds before them what he calls the "works" he has done in the name of his Father. He says, at the end of our Gospel story today, that he and the Father are one. This gets some of the leaders so angry that they pick up rocks, ready to stone him to death right then and there. Jesus asks them "For which of my good works are you going to stone me?" and goes on to tell them, "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:38).

Even though you do not believe my words, he says, believe my works. The works, Jesus says, testify to him. They tell us who he is and who he *is*, is the Messiah – God made flesh, come to dwell among us to save us. Jesus tells us that he and the Father are one. The amazing thing is, he also tells us that we are a part of this relationship – we abide in Jesus, Jesus abides in us. Jesus and the Father are one. Let's let the enormity of that reality soak through us. We are with Jesus, Jesus is with us, Jesus is God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, joined to Christ in our baptisms, we are with God, “transferred into God's kingdom” as Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians (Col.1:13).

Carrying on with Jesus' good works in God's kingdom, trying to bring others with us to share in God's love and life, we, too, like Jesus, must rely on our works, done in the name of the Father, to support our words which we know are not enough on their own to bring people to believe. Jesus heals a man blind from birth and the Pharisees question this man extensively about what has happened. The man, who can now see, is astonished at their unbelief and says, “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If [Jesus] were not from God, he could do nothing” (John 9:32-33). The Pharisees just cannot bring themselves to accept what they are witnessing and so they drive this man out of their presence. Jesus tells the Pharisees that, although they can physically see, they are spiritually blind. This idea of seeing being attached to understanding is still with us. We often say, “I see,” when we mean, “I understand.”

Just as Jesus encounters people professing their devotion to God – and he particularly notes the religious leaders – who could not see the newness of who

he is and what he is doing, we encounter the same thing. The Pharisees knew Jesus had healed a blind man and all they could focus on was the wrongness, in their opinion, of Jesus having done this healing on the Sabbath. We encounter those who profess their devotion to God through belief in Christ who just cannot bring themselves to see the newness of the glorious revelation of God's kingdom around us and through us because their focus is on the supposed wrongness of doing things differently, of doing things we have not done before, of breaking some sort churchy rule we shouldn't break. These are those whose passionate love of God (agape, as we talked about last week) has become misdirected away from God toward worldly things. Other voices have drowned out the true voice of the shepherd.

Jesus knew that some would hear and not believe. He proclaimed God's kingdom anyway. He knew some would see and not believe. He did the works of God anyway – and so do we. Because, like the blind man who was healed, turned away by the religious establishment, and who went back to Jesus to worship him and to say to him, "I believe," the ones who experience *our* good works, done in God's name, some *will* go to Jesus and say to him, "I believe."

"As crucial as preaching and worship are, even more crucial is our total ministry. If those around us do not believe the gospel on the basis of what happens on Sunday morning, perhaps they will believe—or not believe—based on what we do the rest of the week" (Frank L. Crouch, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). There is a saying, "Anyone can observe the Sabbath, making it holy takes the rest of the week." The end of our time together is never the end of our worship – we gather so that

we may be sent. We are sent into the world to love and serve the Lord by sharing our exact same love for God with all others.

Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Through our lives of sharing God’s love, we can help the voice of the shepherd be heard over the other voices that misdirect and misinform. The voice of the Good Shepherd is the voice of promise – a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, “Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.” It says, “You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.” Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke.

“The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance in years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is life that is abundant in the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, love that overflows to others (John 13:34-35) like the love that overflowed into the good works of Tabitha, caring for the women, showing it in her weaving. This abundant life is also *eternal* life because its source is in God who is eternal (17:3), and in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life (11:25-26).

Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the good shepherd is a voice of promise — a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God’s own” (Elizabeth Johnson, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). May our lives – every thought, word, and deed – testify to that voice.