

“But Who Are The Sheep?”

John 10:22-30

Sunday, April 25, 2010—Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Are you wondering why this morning’s reading takes us back to the winter before Jesus’ death, when just last week we were seeing post-resurrection appearances? The lectionary, the three year cycle of readings we Presbyterians use on Sunday morning, can be confusing that way, jumping back and forth in time. It helps to understand that during the first half of the church year, a year that begins with Advent, we focus on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, asking the question, “Who is Jesus?” As we move to the second half of the church year, we start asking the question, “What does it mean to follow Jesus?” And to help us answer that question, the lectionary offers us this flashback.

It is the time of the festival of the Dedication, better known to us as Hanukkah. Jews celebrate Hanukkah in December, around the same time as we celebrate Christmas. Although Christians sometimes think of Hanukkah as a Jewish Christmas, it is actually a minor observance of the Jewish calendar. It commemorates a somewhat obscure Jewish military victory in the second century BCE. Under the leadership of the Maccabee family, Jewish forces defeated the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes, ruler of Syria and successor to Alexander the Great. The Maccabees recaptured the holy city of Jerusalem and they purified and rededicated the temple, which had been defiled by Antiochus and his troops. It is said that when the Maccabees arrived to take back the temple, there was only one small vessel of oil there to light the temple lamp. Miraculously, it burned for eight days. So on Hanukkah, Jews light the special candelabra known as the menorah, one additional candle each night for eight nights, until all eight candles are ablaze. Hanukkah celebrates this miracle of God, who once again saved Jews and Jewish traditions from extinction at the hands of a hostile surrounding culture.

So in this morning’s reading, we find Jesus in the temple on Hanukkah. There he meets up with some of his challengers, the religious leaders, who demand to know if he is the Messiah. It’s pretty clear from the way they’re talking that they’ve made up their minds he isn’t. Our translation says “How long will you keep us in suspense?” But in Greek it is more like “How long will you continue to annoy us?”

“I’ve already told you,” Jesus says, but he hasn’t really, not in so many words. This is the first time in John’s Gospel where Jesus is asked directly if he is the Messiah. So Jesus goes on to explain: if you look at what I do, you’ll know who I am. Look at the miraculous healings and feedings—they tell the truth about who I am. But you don’t believe, because you don’t belong to my sheep.

Who are the sheep? Jesus answers that question plainly. The sheep are those who follow him, and to whom he has given eternal life. He is their Good Shepherd forever, and they cannot be separated from his love and care, not today, not tomorrow, not in hard times, not in miserable times, never.

But, there’s an unsettling aspect of this text, and that’s the implication that membership in the flock is not automatic. Some belong, some don’t. Does this mean God’s love and favor are doled out like the rewards on reality TV, where some are in and others are out? Is God for some people and against others?

Some of the founders of our faith, John Calvin among them, thought so. Calvin affirmed a doctrine we call double predestination. which says that from the beginning, God has chosen some to lead lives of faith and rejected others. The appeal of this line of thinking, I suppose, is that it does explain what we actually see. Some people are in the church; some aren’t. Some hear the Christian message and believe it; some don’t. Double predestination says God planned it that way.

While there are a few passages in Scripture that support double predestination, there are many more that say that God's grace is for everyone, not just a select few:

"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17)

"The Lord is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9)

"And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

So if we can agree that it's time to retire the doctrine of double predestination, what alternatives do we have to help us understand who belongs to the flock? One alternative is universalism, the view that God loves and is gracious to all people, chooses all, and rejects none. Everyone is in; no one is out. Unlike double predestination, which proclaims good news to some people and bad news to others, universalism says everyone is in with God and no one is out. In a culture that loves political correctness and believes that all truth is relative, universalism has a great deal of appeal. But it ignores the Biblical texts, and there are many of them, that say the way we live on earth will have eternal consequences. Jesus issued many warnings about this. In general, his warnings were addressed not to unbelievers, but to the devout religious folks who claimed to know and follow God, but who failed to treat others with Godlike love and compassion. Universalism ignores these warnings and says, not to worry. Even if you hold grudges and don't want to be reconciled with other people, things are going to turn out fine for you. Even if you reject God altogether, God doesn't mind. So don't worry, be happy, and live as you please. That's not a Christian message.

If double predestination says God chooses some and rejects others, and universalism says God chooses everyone and rejects no one, pelagianism says how we stand with God depends on us and what we do. If we turn to God for help, admit our inability to save ourselves, accept God's offer of salvation in Christ and open ourselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, then and only then will we get to be part of God's flock. Pelagianism says, Sure, God is ready to make us part of the flock, to love us, care for us, and give us the gift of eternal life, provided we come to God first, ask for God's help and show we really want it. This belief is very common among Christians today, but it is also unscriptural. If you think about it, you'll see that the belief that it all depends on us and what we do is a recipe for perpetual uncertainty about where we stand with God.

Are you having trouble believing Jesus is who he says he is and that God raised him from death? Well, you just need to try harder. Make up your mind to believe, you can do it. Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, he will come into your life and all will be well with you. If it's all a matter of what we do, then we are set up for endless wondering about whether we've done it right, or well enough. That is not good news, and it is not the Christian message.

The Christian message begins with God, not with us. It says God takes the initiative to reach out to us with the most gracious of offers—to make us God's people, members of the flock. With this offer comes all of God's gracious promises, the ones you heard in the 23d Psalm this morning. God promises to love us, to forgive us, and to be with us forever. God will restore our souls and lead us in right paths. When we walk through the darkest valley, God will be with us. God knows everything about us and has promised never to leave us. These are God's forever promises. We can do nothing to earn or deserve them; they are free gifts of God's grace, offered to all. But God will never force us to accept them.

The truth is, there is no litmus test to tell us whether someone is a member of the flock or not. That's because God's the only one who gets to make that decision, the only one who sees our hearts, the only one who gets to decide if Jesus will make a way for the Buddhists, not to mention the members of Al

Quaida. Before we presume to know how God will ultimately sort out that question, remember this: Scripture tells us that Jesus died not for the Mother Teresas of the world, not for the good and deserving, but for the ungodly. So I think rather than asking who's in and who's out, a question whose answer God has not given us, a better question for us today would be: for what reason, for what purpose does God reach out to us? Why does God make us members of God's flock?

it is not so we can feel personally happy, safe and satisfied about being God's insiders. We are chosen by God not to enjoy special privileges, but to be God's servants, to be channels of God's grace and goodness to others, to be that light that shines in the world's darkness. This is what it means to be members of the flock, it is to allow God to use us to bless the world.

Professor Shirley Guthrie says that God's good news comes with a warning. "Be careful if you want to be one of God's insiders," he says. "It will make your life harder, not easier. It will not give you everything you want; it will demand everything you have. It will not put you on the side of the powerful and righteous of the world, but on the side of the powerless and undeserving. The privilege it brings is not that of enjoying material and spiritual blessings denied others; it is the privilege of living in self-giving love for them" (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 140).

This is what it means to be church. You see, we can have a church without land, buildings, or programs; and although I don't love to say it, we can have a church without a pastor, too, because all of us are called to be ministers. But we can't have a church without a mission, and the mission God has given us is to minister to the outsiders of the world, to those who are ignored and excluded and oppressed, to those who are down on their luck and out of hope.

Jesus says we can know who is by what he does. The healings, the feedings, the offering of love and acceptance to those rejected by others, these deeds are the evidence that he is one with God. He shares God's work and God's purposes.. And the same might be said of us. Our Christian identity is revealed by what we do. Jesus does not say: You must do these things in order to be my sheep. He says, I know you. Because you are my sheep, you will do these things.

May it be so, for you and for me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.