

“Who's Jesus”

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First Presbyterian Church
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON – EZEKIEL 34 1-4, 7-10
NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – JOHN 10:1-10

“Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand...” Stephen McNeil, speaking as a modern-day prophet, used a figure of speech all his own to explain something similar to what Jesus is talking about.

The story goes that two blind men who had been healed by Jesus happened to meet one day. They were so excited to meet someone else who had been healed, they talked about the wonder of sight, the color of flowers, the beauty of butterflies, the glory of sunrises, the faces of children and grandchildren. They talked about the wonder of having seen the face of Jesus. They were laughing and having a great time together, when one of them said, “And do you remember how Jesus took that mud, spit on it, and put it into your eye?” The other fellow looked kind of stunned. “Why no. Jesus simply said, ‘Receive your sight,’ and I could see.” “Wait a minute,” said the first fellow. “You mean he didn't use any mud?” “No.” “Well, did he at least have you wash in the pool of Silōam?” “No, of course not, who ever heard of anything as ridiculous as mud in your eye?!” “Well,” said the first man, “if he didn't put mud in your eyes and have you wash in the pool of Silōam, you are still blind! Blind - do your hear me? Because that's the way Jesus healed me; that's the way he does it!”

The second man began to get angry; he shouted, “Mud, mud, mud! Who ever heard of using mud?! That's the dumbest thing I have ever heard! *You* still have mud in your eyes. You're the one who's still blind!” They got into a big argument; their relationship was destroyed, and right then and there, were formed the first two denominations: the Mudites and the Antimudites!

When Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate ... is a thief and a bandit,” don't we tend to think he's putting up barriers; saying, “It's either my way or the highway; you're either in *my* in-group or you're nobody, I don't even know you?” It's almost natural for us to make distinctions that accept some people and keep others out. Even some differences we focus on?

Christians, down through the centuries, have been as guilty as anybody of setting up barriers that put other people down. And yet, the only barrier that Jesus ever put up was between that which brings blessings and new life and that which brings oppression (such as bullying) and isolation (what the person who gets bullied ends up feeling). “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy,” says Jesus. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” That's who Jesus is.

Last week we asked “Where’s Jesus,” and we found him sitting right next to us, hidden in our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, family and friends who truly strive to be a representation of Jesus to others. But how do we know? How do we know who to follow and who to turn away from in seeking Jesus in our lives?

Our New Testament Lesson gives us a very clear way to identify Jesus in the world, to pick between those people, groups, and ways of thinking that represent Jesus as the “way, the truth and the life,” while avoiding that which tends to lead us astray like lost sheep. Our New Testament Lesson gives us the distinction between Shepherds and Thieves.

If you’re wondering if you’re supporting the right group, aligning with the right way of thinking, following the right person, ask yourself: “Does this group, ideology or person reflect the way of Jesus Christ as God and Shepherd, or do they act more like a bunch of thieves out for their own benefit, with little regard for others?”

The hardest thing about asking this question is to ask it without getting lost in our self-made determinations about people – those things that tend to separate us from one another: race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, political party, physical condition, even same professional belief in God itself. We need to figure out how to be certain it's Jesus we're following even though we live in a world where too often thieves dress up in shepherd’s clothing. In a world such as this, *how are the sheep kept safe?*

This was a big challenge for the early Christians. They, too, had to figure out how best to follow Jesus Christ. And over time, it became clear that those Christians who acted most like Jesus were the ones who made it safely through a world of Greeks and Hebrews and pagans and everything in between. We know this because during the 2nd Century – **just about 100 years after Jesus walked the earth – the Emperor said, publicly. He said, these people called Christians actually care more for the poor of Rome than he did. Even pagans can see “how these Christians love one another,” said the Emperor.**

And then, again, some 300 years after that – around 400 AD – a politician named Aristides had this to say about Christians: “They love one another, they never fail to help widows, and they save orphans from those who hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the person who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home as a brother or sister in the spirit, the Spirit of God.”

In the early church, the most important thing was to see Jesus alive and freely moving in the community of faith, to lift Jesus up so that others could glimpse his grace and power. That was what made a Christian a Christian. It wasn’t a set of beliefs – but a way of being;

it wasn’t sitting in some sanctuary saying the right prayers and singing the right songs – it was going out to those in need and giving the right assistance: providing comfort to those troubled or grieving, food to those going hungry, shelter for those

fallen between the cracks, love and companionship to those being pushed aside by the in-group, treated as outsiders.

How do we know who Jesus is and who's a true follower of Jesus? Jesus is the one who gives life, the one who says – as he does in today's Gospel Lesson – "I came that (others) may have life, and have it abundantly." And yet, if we're really honest with ourselves, we have to admit we have a little problem with this Jesus, don't we? Our problem arises when this Jesus who gives life and gives it abundantly turns around and welcomes someone who we see as interfering with our abundance – with our stash of financial resources, our favorite food or desert at mealtime, the hour or two or three we've set aside for homework, or whatever it is that we're called to do, in the face of a world that's heading in the other direction.

Sometimes we have trouble, don't we, making room for others amid our day-to-day needs, desires and routines? An elderly lady was waiting to pull into a parking space when a young man in his new, red Mercedes sped around her and parked in the space she was waiting for. The little old lady was so upset that she went up to the man and said, "I was going to park there!" The man replied with a smirk, "That's what you can do when you're young and smart." Well this really upset the lady. So she got in her car, backed it up and stomped on the gas, plowing right into his Mercedes. The young man ran back to his car shouting, "What did you do that for!?" The little old lady smiled and said, "That's what you can do when you're old and rich!"

It doesn't matter what label we have - - young or old, rich or poor, gay or straight, Republican or Democrat, male or female, boss or employee, student or teacher - - what matters is who we're being, who we're following when we're threatened by the label we give to somebody else. What do we turn to when we feel threatened by the beliefs, practices, or actions of another person? If we're driving in our car, we turn to the traffic laws; if we're sitting in school or the workplace, we turn to the boss or the teacher or the boss's boss or the principle, or the board of directors or the school board; and if it's our very way of life that is threatened, if we feel we have no other recourse than to take matters into our own hands, we turn to Jesus.

We trust in Jesus as the Good Shepherd to protect us, we trust in Jesus, who says "I am the gate for the sheep." Christ Jesus is the one who ultimately decides what's right and what's wrong; who's in and who's out. Only Christ can tell for sure who is a threat and who is just another sheep trying to follow the shepherd. Jesus never said, "You are the gate" or even "Christianity is the gate." He never said it was *our* job to guard the pasture against the outside world. *We are not the gate.* Jesus is the gate. And as he said, "All who came before (him) are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them." Did you hear that? The sheep do not listen to the thieves and the bandits, to those who, as Jesus said, come "only to steal and kill and destroy." Our job as followers of Christ, as sheep of the Good Shepherd, is not to protect the world against thieves and bandits – against the false shepherds among us. Our job as followers is simply *to not* listen to the false leaders, just as the sheep do not listen to the false shepherd.

That's how we know who's Jesus, who it is who is truly a representation of Christ in the world today. It's those who follow Jesus as the Good Shepherd. "When he has brought out all his own," says Jesus, "he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Followers of Jesus do what Jesus would do. They represent Jesus in the world, in every way but one. Followers of Jesus are not the gate. Jesus is the gate. When a stranger comes near, the follower turns away, doesn't listen to the stranger, the one who doesn't know Jesus in his or her heart.

We are not the gatekeepers; we're not the ones to keep people out. That's God's job; *it's God's job to be the gate*. And the way God does that job is through the power of the Holy Spirit. *Our job is to follow the spirit's guidance*. To look to Jesus and listen for God in the decisions we make – whether at church or in the workplace, as a denomination or a country, as individuals or as families. When we hear Jesus speak to us through the power of the Holy Spirit – when we recognize the Good Shepherd guiding us through life – we but need to follow, that's it, assured that what comes from following the Good Shepherd will be the safety and provision of a pasture surrounded by God's care and concern.

As followers of Jesus, we don't need to protect ourselves from worldly dangers. No, as long as we're focused on following Jesus, we can move through life with confidence, assured of having what's truly important in life – the provision of our basic needs, the care and companionship of Jesus, and the mercy and protection of God Almighty. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Each dawn proclaims resurrection. Every sunrise tells of a new beginning and all creation sings for joy. From the start of time, Divine Creator, you painted each day with light, fashioned beauty from mountain heights to valley lows, and caused praise to whistle through trees and splash on seashores.

When we took to hurrying through beauty, neglecting each other and taking blessings for granted, you sent Jesus to open our eyes to the new dawn and stir our dreams to a new beginning. Thank you for the gift of second chances. You are holy and loving, O God, bringing us with each new day the possibility to deepen relationships, forgive ourselves and those near to us, make peace and share love

Just as every sunrise rolls back cloud of darkness, we turn to you this day to shine light into the distant recesses of our world. Let those blanketed in fear be lifted out in the strength of your presence.

Help those who feel lost – in their relationships, their careers, their sense of health and wellbeing – help them to find direction and encouragement in your love and provision. And let all who turn to you be assured of the promises of Scripture, through which we hear your voice, feel your companionship, receive your healing. Lead us to just the right words, even as we turn now to the words that you taught us to pray, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

