

Circle of Mercy Sermon
John 10:22-30
“Among My Sheep Where Titles Don't Matter”
April 17, 2016

*The book of John can be hard to read and preach from. Part of that difficulty comes from the prevalence of anti-semitic language. The book of John was written later than the other gospels and reflects a growing tension between the early church and those outside the church. But all people discussed in the story this evening are Jews. Jesus is a Jew. His followers are Jews. The people questioning him about his identity are Jews. Throughout this sermon I will refer to the people who question Jesus as Pharisees not Jews to make clear that those who harass and undermine Jesus are people with elevated status and power. This is consistent with what is done in the other gospels.

Jesus is at the temple. It's winter. The festival of dedication, what we now call Hanukkah, is beginning. Among the few hundred thousand people that likely would have arrived at the temple by this point, the Pharisees* spot Jesus walking through Solomon's colonnade (one of the outer most portions of temple). The questions that show up over and over again in the gospels are asked once more "Who are you? Why won't you just tell us?"

From Jesus' baptism to this moment in chapter 10, Jesus has done publicly roughly 13 things that would identify him as a miracle-worker at the very least -he heals a man paralyzed for 38 years, he feeds 5000 people with five loaves of a bread and two fish, he gave a man sight who was blind from birth- the list goes on.

In addition to doing a bunch of confounding things, Jesus demonstrates a level of knowledge that doesn't match his level of study. He seems to be able to call up little details of the law to refute arguments made by scholars who have studied their whole lives. He prophesies, he preaches, he speaks in parables.

This stuff could stand on its own, of course. This stuff goes a long way towards proving who Jesus is but there's more. Jesus actually does say who he is and not in a veiled way or a parable, not by referencing obscure prophecy. He just says it. The best example prior to chapter 10 being his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus tells her "all that she ever did". And she says "I know that the Christ is coming. And when he comes he will tell us everything." Jesus responds "I'm the Christ." He calls himself the Son of Man multiple times. This very passage ends with Jesus saying "the Father and I are one." Once he says this the Pharisees promptly pick up stones to kill him because they heard him "blaspheming", identifying himself as "the Son of God".

So he said it plainly and they heard it. And it's clear that lots of people do know who he is because he has sheep, he has followers.

Then why the denial from the Pharisees? Why do these folks need Jesus to present his title plainly yet again?

When I went to Calvary Baptist Sunday school in Dothan, AL we were given those "fruits of the spirit" coloring sheets. I don't know if y'all had those but it was just a picture of apples and bananas and oranges and then at the bottom it says "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" -Galatians 5:22.

The way that faithfulness was explained to me as I colored that sheet was that faith is something you work at. If you want faith bad enough and you work at it, you'll have it. You will believe in God. It's all about the effort you put in as a good Christian.

I've also heard faith described as a gift. So some people just have faith and others have to work at or perhaps they never have it. It's freely given...or it isn't.

But I don't know that either of those ways of framing faith work for this story.

These folks are all witnessing Christ do the same stuff. Does one group just happen to contain all the people gifted with faith? Does one group work harder to believe? I doubt it. I think to get to an answer we have to look farther back in the book of John to chapter 2.

In Chapter 2, it's Spring. Passover is about to start. Jesus is lacing together cord to make a whip to drive the money-changers and the salespeople out of the temple. This image is familiar enough. I thought I knew this story well but I forgot that the disciples were standing by watching, remembering. It says that they remembered that it is written "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The placement of this old saying next to this event makes sense. Jesus loves God's house so much that he can't bare to see it turned into a site of commerce. He has to cleanse the temple.

However, it's a little harder to see the zeal a mere two verses later when Jesus tells the scribes "Destroy the temple and I'll raise it in three days". Sure, we know that this is a metaphor for Christ's body during the crucifixion and resurrection, but he could have used a different metaphor. He's talking about a temple that took 46 years to build and is at the center of life for a lot of people in the ancient world, especially the people he is talking to. Why use the metaphor if you just cleansed the temple, its clean now? Why talk about the destruction of the temple if you think it's salvageable? Why talk about its collapse if you love it?

I think I know. At the end of this chapter it says that many believed in him at Passover because of the signs he was doing. Friends, these are the only signs discussed: the cleansing of the temple and the call for its destruction. The folks who saw the cleansing

of the temple were in the marketplace. The temple, which was huge, was organized so that the center was most holy and could only be accessed by elder priests. The marketplace was out on the very outside of the temple (least holy) occupied by Jews of low standing and gentiles. Those people needed to see the temple cleansed. They could understand how the destruction of the temple, an institution that was closely colluding with a corrupt Empire, might be a good thing. They needed to follow someone who would dare to critique and question an institution that was holding them down, keeping them on the periphery of the temple and life generally.

But the folks who could walk into the center of the temple, access to the holy of holies, benefit from the maintenance of the temple and the collusion with the Romans...those people not only don't need anyone to mount a critique, they can't allow for it.

We have faith in things because we need to have faith in them. And conversely, we don't have faith in things or people or institutions, not really, unless they liberate us and make us whole on some level.

These texts, chapters 10 and 2, just seem to have so much congruence. Jesus has this conversation with skeptical, powerful people in the Spring after cleansing the temple. And by the feast of dedication in winter, the feast that honors the reconsecration of the altar after it had been made unclean by invaders, they're still asking. And Jesus just says "You don't believe because you are not among my sheep." He says you aren't going to believe. I have done everything I could do to prove it. I have preached the words you supposedly needed to hear. I've said who I am. It will never be enough. You are not among my sheep and my sheep don't have much in common with you. They aren't people with power but they are people who don't need me to tell them who I am constantly because I have shown them what I am about. I am about overturning systems of oppression. I am about liberation. For freedom my sheep have been set free. I am showing them what it means to never submit to enslavement again. Among my sheep I don't need titles.

As I think about these two stories, I think about faith, that's been reflected here. But I also can't help but think about the predicament of the modern American church.

A couple of months ago when we were talking about Seasons of Faith and Conscience we talked a little about this. Maybe the white protestant church, membership numbers in rapid decline and churches closing regularly, is entering an exilic period or some reconfiguration or de-structuring. There are lots of names for what could be happening. It's fine to name stuff. We need to do that to try to get our minds around the loss.

But a lot of times we do this other thing. We try to pick out a historical moment when something similar was happening. We think maybe if we can find that period and figure out how they made it, we'll know how to fix things.

Some people say "oh, we're like the early church so we're just going to do everything real small-scale and go back to the essentials". Others look to monasticism "we're all so undisciplined, that's the problem. If we just had a rule of life...we'd be ok!" Or maybe we're the Medieval church "we're all so visual now. We barely read. If we just brought back the sensory elements of the church, that would fix it!" Some people only want to go back 50 or 60 years to the big steeple church with clearer rules and simpler, unquestioned theology.

But we aren't the early church. We're not some tiny group of persecuted people converting to a new faith. We're not monastics and we never will be. Living a life free from the hectic hustle and bustle demanded by this economy and this culture's individualism essentially requires that you be cloistered. We might be more visual but we can never go back to the illiteracy that marked the Medieval church because we would never allow everything to be interpreted for us and there are other places, more fun places, we can go to have an all-encompassing sensory experience. And sixty years ago may not seem like a long time but we are so far away from the church of American Christendom that it might as well have been 300 years ago.

I wish it was one of these answers. I wish that I knew the fix. I led a retreat a few weeks ago in Nashville for young people who had either left or were struggling to stay in various christian communities or churches. I wanted to be able to say to them "I know I'm young but I've read all the right books and really discerned the right answer". But instead I went without one note in hand because I was so dang confused that I just felt like I couldn't lead anybody through anything.

Important things were discussed over the weekend despite my lack of notes. One of the things was that we sat down together and said "if we are confused about where to go next, lets try to think about what we have all been instructed to do by the Bible and other Christians". There was a man in the room who had been raised Free Will Baptist and another guy who had been a Dominican brother for many years. Individually we could have come up with stuff that didn't speak to other people in the room. But instead we collectively came up with this list:

1. Eucharist
2. Foot-washing
3. Tell the Story
4. Eat with one another
5. Pray
6. Look to the cloud of witnesses (particularly Mary)

7. Be fearless
8. Acknowledge everyone's right to care (including our own)
9. Observe spiritual seasons/church calendar
10. Love
11. Resist

Every person there could see that the institutions that hadn't been great for them, the institutions that felt empty or cruel or whatever weren't needed for these things to be accomplished.

I think if we can find a parallel period to where the church is right now it might be the period discussed tonight. The temple, a place of commerce and the stomping ground of moneyed government reps, can't speak to most people on the margins. It fails to be a place they can have faith in. Total destruction might be imminent but for sure things are sullied and splitting apart already. It's in need of at least a fierce cleansing.

But take heart if you are discouraged by the deterioration of the churches and Christian communities around you. The sheep will still be gathered, they will hear the voice of Christ, and no one will be able to snatch them from his hand. They will still have faith in the one they need, the who cares about their freedom.

During the feast of dedication, there was a prescribed list of readings. Included in that set was Psalm 30. As Jesus walked through the colonnade, being questioned once more about who he was and hearing the money-changers and salespeople he had driven out mere months before working in the market nearby, it would be fair to imagine that he was also hearing Psalm 30.

Our call to worship was Psalm 23 but let's close by hearing the psalm Jesus heard while he claimed his sheep once again.

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,

and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,

and you have healed me.

O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,

restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.[a]

Sing praises to the Lord, O faithful ones,

and give thanks to God's holy name.

For God's anger is but for a moment;

God's favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,

but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity,

“I shall never be moved.”

By your favor, O Lord,

you had established me as a strong mountain;

you hid your face;

I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cried,

and to the Lord I made supplication:

“What profit is there in my death,

if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!

O Lord, be my helper!”

You have turned my mourning into dancing;

you have taken off my sackcloth

and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.