

Sermon Text – Sunday, May 11, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Acts 9:36-43; 2nd Reading: Revelation 7:9-17
Scripture for Message: John 10:22-30 “A Good Shepherd”

Jesus said these words while walking in the portico of Solomon in the temple. It is during the festival of Dedication – or what today we know as Hanukkah. Why did John feel compelled to tell us about the time and place? Jesus is walking and talking in the very section of the temple that was purified after the desecration caused by Antiochus IV, that led to the Maccabean revolt less than two hundred years earlier. After that desecration, the community rebuilt the altar stone by stone, removing all that had been defiled. Think about that, Jesus is speaking and stopping by a column proclaiming his identity in the very spot where the community came together to recommit to the reality of God’s promised presence among them in the physical structure of that temple – the dwelling place of the Lord. Now God was present among them in the physical being of Jesus.

This “Good Shepherd” discourse happens right after Jesus healed the man born blind, there is that whole back and forth with the Pharisees about blindness both literal and figurative. The Pharisees ask Jesus, “What? Are we blind too?” and Jesus responds, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” The Pharisees deny the signs that Jesus is from God – how can Jesus be from God when he does not bear the expected indications of being the Messiah they sought.

They then, in the section of chapter ten that we just read, ask Jesus “are you the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Apparently, they were not looking in the right direction, how much plainer could Jesus be? They had seen the signs and the works that point directly to who Jesus was. How could a sinner cast out demons, how could a sinner cure the blind? Maybe they weren’t blind, but they surely could not see. Jesus

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answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe.” I wonder what more they required before they could come to believe.

Maybe their hearts were not open enough to believe, Jesus tells them “You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.” You could draw a conclusion from what Jesus says to them that God did not intend for them to believe. However, we know that the invitation to follow Jesus is open to everyone and anyone, so maybe it is just that their focus was on worldly things and to them the dwelling place of God continued to be the building in which they now stood. Jesus does answer their question once for all with the statement, “The Father and I are one.”

This brings me to an important question that we all must answer. Do we believe what he says or are we looking for more signs? What are our expectations of the Messiah? Do we believe Jesus’ promise that is right here in our scripture that “No one will snatch them [my sheep] out of my hand.” After all, we don’t have any first-hand knowledge of Jesus’ miracles we weren’t there when that man born blind regained his sight. We weren’t at the wedding when the water was turned to wine, we weren’t there when Jesus restored Lazarus to life after four days in the tomb. What signs do we have that Jesus is the Messiah, what is there to compel us to believe he is the “way” for us? That is a question demanding an answer.

Today, maybe we can explore the signs and discover the many ways Jesus has shown us who he is. Scripture of course tells us who Jesus is when we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus. There is some corroborating evidence of the historical Jesus when two or more accounts tell the same story – it lends credence to what is recounted when we hear it from more than one source. Even some of the “letters” and records that are not included in our Bible give accounts of things Jesus did or said that lead us into belief. However, a good deal of

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what we read must be taken on faith – remember what John records Jesus saying when Thomas doubted – “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That is faith – believing without seeing.

But I wonder if we as a church must also focus on how to bring people to faith, either renewed faith or finding faith for the first time. How do we assure those who doubt that they are welcome, and they are beloved children of God? Even when we believe, or if we feel we know that Christ died for the sins of the world, how do we ensure that Christ’s mission of forgiveness and salvation reaches everyone? Scriptures tell us that the day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus is Lord – what do we do with that knowledge? Take a moment to look around this sanctuary, what are the signs right here that proclaim Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Savior of the world?

We proudly display the cross which to some of us is a clear symbol of God’s sacrifice through Jesus to defeat sin and death once for all. Then there is the table of remembrance where we celebrate the Lord’s Supper each week. We repeat the words Jesus spoke on that last evening in that upper room with his disciples. We share the bread and cup, symbols of his sacrifice, just as Jesus did when he told his disciples this is my body broken and blood shed for you. We read the scriptures that give us Jesus’ words and the letters that tell us who Jesus was to the people who wrote them. We display artwork and banners in our sanctuary, and these are all familiar imagery for us. What if, however, someone was to come into our church, and they were not familiar with this imagery? How do we show that person that the Jesus we preach is the Messiah, the son of a living God?

I guess it is the same way that we try to teach anyone about who God is. I guess it is the same way that we ourselves have come to believe in God. But the world is different now, our culture is different

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now. When we look around our communities there are few people seeking Jesus in the church anymore. That's not to say that people are not seeking spiritual experiences there is plenty of that, but spirituality in our current culture means many different things. I have learned recently that two of the fastest growing "apps" in popularity include Tarot Cards and Astrology apps. People are indeed seeking something but where they seek might be what we would consider the wrong places.

So, how do we as a church make the study of scripture more relevant? How do we get God's word to the people who hunger and thirst for it? How do we help those who are seeking find the true Jesus Christ and not some false prophet? These are questions that must find answers so the church can move into what has become changing times. Maybe the church (not our church but the universal church) has too many rules to follow – maybe Christians today are like the Pharisees of the past, the Pharisees that Jesus confronts with his comments. I wonder if there are many people who would join us in worship but for the rules they think we have. People who might love to hear more about Jesus and about salvation, forgiveness, and grace, but they are not ready to conform. Does anyone really have to conform?

What rules did Jesus have? I know of, we all know of two commandments he gives us. From those two flows every good and faithful act. Love God and love others. What other rules are there that are not covered by those commandments? Love God, love others, and follow Jesus who shows us how best to do both. Isn't that what Jesus is telling his followers when he speaks to them about the sheep of his pasture? Isn't that what he tells us when he speaks about those who hear his voice and follow him? When we follow Jesus and believe God's promises he gives believers eternal life and the ones who faithfully follow him will never perish. Then he tells us and them – "The Father and I are one."

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So that is the statement that we need to understand and use as a guide for living. Using that statement as our guide, we can help others understand that they too are invited to follow Jesus, that Jesus will be their life's guide. What does it mean to us to know that Jesus' and God are one? I could go down a path of talking about the Trinity but that's for another day. When we think about Jesus standing in the portico of Solomon talking about being one with the father – it is an illustration of something new happening in the lives of the people. No longer is the temple the dwelling place of the Lord their God – Jesus is where God can be found. Through Jesus, God can be approached. One day the Roman Imperial armies will destroy the temple where they stand, man made things are not eternal – Jesus however gives us something permanent to cling to for safety, a place where we can find God.

In this new day and age, the church can become an avenue for people to figure out how to live a life following Jesus. The church can walk with others as they seek the true living Christ, not according to our rules but according to how God directs them. We can do that without giving people a bunch of rules to follow, Jesus' disciples did it with just one – love God, love others. We can do that through studying scripture and helping others through scripture study to hear Jesus' words and believe God's promises. God is the one calling people, our job is to help them follow their calling. Sometimes people just need a companion and a guide, we can be that companion as Jesus becomes their guide, their Good Shepherd.