

Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2022
 “Hearing and Following” (John 10:22-30)

In the short scene from John’s gospel that serves as our text for today, we get a little snapshot of the controversy that went on between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time. This particular controversy is about Jesus’ true identity. *How long will you keep us in suspense?* they ask. *If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.* Jesus tells them that if they want to know who he is, they should look at what he has done: *The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.* But they still won’t believe. And the reason they won’t believe is because they are not part of his sheep.

He then continues to answer his challengers with a few sentences about the dynamic that takes place between the Shepherd and his sheep. Jesus uses four verbs in his reply I would like us to take a brief look at them and see what they tell us about Jesus and his gospel.

The verb, *to know*, is the first I want us to explore. Jesus says, *I know my sheep.* He is saying that he knows each and every one of us. Now that statement can be both frightening and comforting. It is frightening because of all the secrets in our lives. We all have things we don’t share with others, but to think that Jesus knows us entirely – all our thoughts, our motives, our actions – and that he knows us even better than we know ourselves can be somewhat disconcerting.

But there is a flip side to this knowing. Jesus also knows our needs, our pains, our hurts, our sorrows. This means that if we come to this hour of worship this morning carrying some sort of burden, if we come bearing some sort of sorrow, if we come facing some terrible and terrifying decision, or if there is something in our lives that seems impossible, we can rest assured that Jesus knows about it and that he understands.

He understands because, in his humanity, Jesus discovered first-hand how difficult life can be for us. Even though he was without sin, I believe he still knew the temptations, the burdens, the troubles, the hurts and the cares we face every day. Therefore, understanding the good news of Jesus begins with the knowledge that Christ knows us completely inside-out. He knows us intimately.

The second verb I would call to our attention is the very, *to give*. Jesus says, *To my sheep, I give eternal life.* In John’s gospel, the phrase “eternal life” certainly represents everlasting life in heaven; but it represents more than that. It stands not only for what we will experience in the next world, but for the completeness and wholeness we have in Christ in this world. When Jesus says, *I give them eternal life*, he echoes what the psalmist of Psalm 23 wrote: *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

Other modern translations of this psalm read, *The Lord is my Shepherd. He gives me everything I need.* The psalmist is saying that God knows our needs and provides for them. Now, if you’re like me, you probably have hundreds of wants. But even though I have lots of wants, I find that I don’t have very many needs. That’s because God gives me what I need. The wants may or may not be fulfilled, but God provides for my needs. And that’s probably a good thing for me and for you. Getting everything we want would surely lead us into trouble. So when Jesus says, *I give you eternal life*, it’s another way of saying *I have everything that I need.*

A third verb Jesus uses is the verb, *to hear*. He says, *My sheep hear my voice*. You and I know there are different kinds of hearing, don't we?

A college psychology class studied what they labeled *the cocktail party phenomenon*. It seems that in a crowded, noisy room a person is inclined to hear his or her name above all the other sounds, even if the name is spoken in a normal, conversational tone from the other side of the room. We evidently like to hear our names called – and we hear them.

However, sometimes we practice selective hearing. You know about this kind of hearing from your spouse or kids. They hear only what they want to hear. Some even practice selective hearing during the sermon. But selective hearing is out of place with Jesus. He speaks to us of his love, mercy, and forgiveness and wants us to hear about these things. He wants us to know that he gives of himself, but he also wants us to hear much more.

For example, Jesus tells us very plainly to love our enemies. We hear it again and again, but we're not so sure we really want to hear. Psalm 23 contains a wonderful line about our enemies: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*. If we're like most people, when we hear that God prepares a banquet table for us, we are inclined to hear it as being prepared for us alone. Our enemies are standing outside, noses pressed against the glass, looking in. They see us feasting and they are jealous. But I suggest to you this morning that most likely the Hebrew meaning of this line is that God provides a table where we sit down with our enemies and feast together. We feast together in the presence of, in the company of, in the association with our enemies.

Or another example is Jesus telling us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And Jesus is very clear about this. There is no mistaking about what he says. Yet, even though he is very clear, we are sometimes not so sure we want to hear. We practice selective hearing. But the mark of Jesus' sheep is that we hear *all* of what Jesus has to say to us.

Thus far, we have said that Jesus knows his sheep, gives them eternal life, and that his sheep hear his voice. The fourth verb I want us to explore is the verb, *to follow*. *My sheep hear my voice and they follow me*, Jesus says. As the Shepherd's sheep, we not only hear Christ's voice, but we are called to heed, to respond, to follow. To me, it seems that the only way we can follow is if we make following the last thing.

Too often, we get the gospel turned upside-down. We feel that unless we are obedient, unless we love our enemies and our neighbors and do all those things Jesus instructs us to do, God will not love us. So we try to earn God's love by following. We put the following first – make it our focus – and that approach does not make for a good follower. For me, logic dictates that the following comes last. When we understand that God knows and loves us for who we are, not what we do, we want to follow Christ. When we acknowledge that God gives us eternal life not only in the next world, but by giving us everything we need in this one, we trust in Christ and his provision. We want to follow him. After learning these two things – that we are known and given eternal life – when the Good Shepherd calls our names, we are willing to follow in response to what he has first done, not out of what we want him to do. In other words, we follow and do the things followers do because we know God loves and cares for us. We don't do the following in

order to get God to love us. So, the following comes after the knowing. It comes after the giving of eternal life. It comes after hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd. If we are to know the gospel, we must understand our obedience to Christ as a *response* to his unconditional love, not as a means of attaining it.

When we understand this, we will understand that Christ's call to follow is a call to move out, to not sit in the same place, to not continue in our old ways, but to stretch ourselves further than we've ever stretched before. Today, I invite us all to begin again in following Jesus. Gathered around his holy meal with your family and friends – and perhaps your enemies – I pray that you and I will rediscover that we are fully known, be assured that we have been given eternal life, hear the call of the Shepherd once again, and faithfully follow. Amen.