

Jesus says something to these people that gets my attention. **“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.”** (10:27) These words are part of Jesus’ answer to these who pressure him. They want to know if he is the Messiah. He answers them, but the answer he gives is not what they want. Like many lessons in the gospel of John, we peel back layers of insight like we pull away the skin of an onion. There are layers of meaning in Jesus words. At one level, they describe what we are doing here together. At a deeper level, they describe the life we share in the church, the life we live week in and week out. And at still another level, they describe a longing we have as Christ’s followers and as congregations. Of all the ways human beings live on this earth, this way of the Good Shepherd is radical. By radical, I mean a primordial way, a foundational way of life as God’s own children, as followers of Jesus Christ. Consider with me the good news we experience here this morning, the good news we normally share within our church families and also the good news we hope to experience some day in the future as we grow as God’s people.

Jesus says, **“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.”** First, consider what is happening here and now. We are doing something we have never done before. We worship as one community. Once Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds!” (40, King) How often we say one thing in our statements of faith and do something else in the lives we live. Not today! The creeds and the deeds have moved together today. We come as one community to worship the God who made us all. We come to act out what Paul says, **“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”** (Galatians 3:28) We come as sister and brother Presbyterians, as followers of Jesus Christ and as co-workers in ministry to a needy world.

Somehow by the grace of God, we have managed to hear Jesus’ voice calling us to come together. Many know it is right for people to worship and share a meal like we are doing. Today we are following the Good Shepherd’s voice. We are doing something more than listening. We have trusted God’s grace to work. Now...we are following. We have created a service. We have brought our choir here. We have prepared food. We have arranged a place to meet and here we are. God is with us in what we are doing. We are grateful for your kind invitation to be here. We look forward to hosting you in September and doing this again. Consider the good news of this moment for which we thank Almighty God.

Jesus says, **“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.”** There is also in these words the good news we normally share with our church families on every other Sunday morning. We are believers who understand that our life in the church is built around hearing God’s word, experiencing God’s grace and following God’s direction. Sometimes the routine of these expectations grows stale. It is God’s voice somehow breaking in when we recognize our staleness. Sometimes the routine of our church life no longer delivers what we need. It is easy for us to stumble off the path of this radical way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the spiritual reality of the Christian community in Life Together, his little book about the church. He says there is a difference between the community of the Spirit and the human community. Sometimes the church begins to become more human than spiritual. The spiritual community is about truth. The human community is about desire. The community of the spirit is about light; the human community is about darkness. The community of the spirit is the “fellowship of those

called by Christ.” The human community is the fellowship of devout souls. One is about brotherly service, the other is about subjection to peoples’ desires. In one, God alone rules, in the other, people with exceptional power and influence rule. In one, God’s word alone is binding, in the other people bind others to themselves. (31-32, Bonhoeffer)

When we can recognize what is happening to us, when we feel stale, when we need something more, it is God’s voice, God’s presence, God’s Spirit saying, “Here I am. I never left you. Listen to me. I know you. Follow me and walk in the way I have for you to live.” Sometimes our churches fall off the wagon; sometimes we lose our way. Thank God when this happens. Somehow our leaders and our people and the Spirit at work helps us reclaim this radical way Christ offers. Consider the good news of God working in our churches week in and week out.

Jesus says, “**My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.**” There is in these words a great longing we have as followers and as congregations. We wonder how the church will survive. We wonder about future generations of believers. We wonder how the church will remain faithful in ways we have never considered. Is our wondering filled with faith and hope and love or is there only uncertainty? In the Invitational hymn we will sing a prayer in which we will ask our Shepherd to lead us, feed us, free us and love us still. This is not just an idle exercise...a musical filler into the offering. It is an occasion to ask , “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.” We need his “tender care.” This longing we share for the church of the future is real. It will not be addressed only by hymns and prayers though.

One scholar claims this chapter 10 in John is an opportunity for the contemporary church to reflect on theological issues. Sometimes the worries of church leaders are endless. Sometimes, there should be the opportunity to think and pray and reflect seriously about what we are doing as people who follow Christ. Here is what she recommends. First, John 10 suggests an opportunity “to consider the Christological heart of the church’s identity.” Many believers bring all kinds of expectations to church with them just as people brought expectations to Jesus. Here in this chapter is the invitation to take seriously the “gift of Jesus’ life as the church’s starting point.” What does it mean for us to follow this Shepherd? What is his ‘eternal life’ about? What difference does it make if we have the assurance we will never perish? What do these things mean for members of our congregation? Unless leaders consider the church’s identity with Christ and take time to understand the meaning of these words, the church will miss something important. Secondly, here is an opportunity to reassess the meaning of being a shepherd, and a leader. Any notion that sets shepherds in the church apart from sheep, any move to increase the distance between leaders and congregation, diminishes and loses what Jesus intends. Where is this happening? What can we do to reclaim the relationship Jesus models with his flock? Finally, here is an opportunity to reflect on community practices. What does it mean to live as Jesus’ sheep? What do Jesus’ sheep do? How are Jesus’ sheep manifested in the world? These are questions and theological issues for leaders and members to work on together. We long for our church to be filled with the Spirit of this Good Shepherd. Consider the good news we long to experience some day in the future as we grow as God’s people.

Here is the radical way of Jesus Christ who says about his followers, “**My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.**” The Shepherd’s psalm, Psalm 23 reflects this journey. There is a moment in the center of the psalm when God becomes real. Unless God is real to us, we will not stay in this for long. Unless God becomes real to us, the church will be looking for the wrong things.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was a young man, he was thrust in the role of leading a movement. When his leadership was announced, he was thrown in jail for driving 30 miles an hour in a 25 mile an

hour zone. When he got home from jail late one night, someone called him and told him some things I cannot repeat. They said, “we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.” He explained later in a sermon. “And I got to the point that I couldn’t take it anymore. I was weak... And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it...I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, ‘Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think that the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage...And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.’ ...I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.” (20-21, Yancy) Here is the kind of prayer we can pray. Here is the One who will take care of us. It is a radical way to hear the voice of Jesus Christ, to know his love and to follow him.

Good Shepherd, thank you for this day and the opportunity to be here to worship you together and enjoy the fellowship of food. Thank you for your word, your presence and the opportunity to follow you in ministry. Thank you for guiding us onto paths of righteousness for your name’s sake. Lead us and feed us. Receive us and free us and keep loving us until we will live in your presence forever. We pray in your name. Amen.

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