

May 12, 2019
John 10.22-30
Suspense
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“If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Sounds like a fair question. How many times have you listened to a politician and wished you could demand, “Tell us plainly.” We make fun of and deride those who are guilty of fuzzy Washington math. And there is another side to this demand. Have you ever felt defensive when a preacher demanded of you to put your faith into words? There is a certain appeal to plain speaking. But the trouble with demanding that we speak plainly comes when we are speaking about an inherently complex subject, or even a subject that is beyond our understanding and to make it understandable is to so simplify it that we mislead the listener and demean the subject.

The difficulty in speaking plainly about the things of God is that the things of God are anything but plain. Whenever a person begins speaking unequivocally about God, it is a sure sign that the person is no longer speaking about God. We can speak unequivocally about the things our minds can grasp, but God is not one of those things. God grasps us; we do not grasp God. This often happens in Bible studies. We go to Bible study because we want to know what the Bible means. Most of the time we go to Bible study because we believe that the Bible is hiding a coded message that we can crack, and too often the secret key for cracking the great mystery is having the right faith. The Bible is not a problem to be solved. Holy Scripture invites us to experience and to participate in these rich stories with multiple layers of meaning.

What do the Jews, whoever they are (which is the kind of thing we would spend days talking about in Bible study), mean with their question to Jesus? “How long will you keep us in suspense?” Some Bible scholars suggest that a better translation for that question is, “How long will you annoy us, or vex us?” Isn’t vex a great word? If the correct translation is annoy or vex, then clearly the questioners are adversaries. They are annoyed with Jesus for not giving them a clear excuse for attacking him. Whether it is Jesus or John the storyteller, the words are ambiguous and nuanced. If you go to John looking for black and white answers, you will be vexed. But for some of us, we find comfort in the ambiguity, because we identify with it in our struggles to understand exactly who Jesus is and what he means in our lives.

Another way to understand the question of the Jews is that it was a genuine seeking question. The Jews are honestly seeking to understand who Jesus is. Only a few verses before our story for today the Jews were divided about what Jesus had said and done. Perhaps that is the best clue for our understanding. If they were divided then maybe both perspectives are intended by the question. Perhaps that is why John leaves the question ambiguous. One group wants to know who Christ is and the other wants him to make a claim that will give them cause to reject him.

{I do not cite sources in my sermons primarily because I do not plan to publish them. In addition, it is too time consuming.}

Every now and then I hear a story about someone doing something so outrageous that I think to myself, “I wish I had thought of that.” And even more I think, “I wish I had done that.” Maybe we have the idea but we are not brave enough to try it, even if it is for the sake of the Gospel. I recently heard about a young minister in East St. Louis attempting to start a church. If you know anything about East St. Louis, you know that it would be the equivalent of starting a church in Prichard. As any smart entrepreneur would do, this young minister first studied the neighborhood. He noticed that there were very few businesses and institutions in the neighborhood and the ones there were in sad shape. You may remember that not long ago I mentioned in a sermon that a certain franchise chicken restaurant was the only business in a certain section of Birmingham; noticeably absent from that neighborhood were Presbyterian Churches. The young minister in East St. Louis observed that once a week all of the people came from blocks around to gather at the Laundromat. A common experience for disadvantaged people is that they cannot afford a washer and dryer. The enterprising young minister convinced a wealthy suburban church to provide the funds to buy a Laundromat.

The minister is at the Laundromat every morning, maintaining the machines, making coffee and visiting with whoever will talk with him. When I heard this story, the new church development pastor had held the first worship service in the Laundromat one month before. Hearing the voice of the shepherd calling us to some “crazy” ministry can be intimidating. But what if it is God’s will for this church? What if a member of this church thought it Mobile County would be a good idea to have a garden and give away the produce to hungry people in? According to the agency Feeding the Gulf Coast, 17.9% of the population in this county is food insecure. According to the 2017 census data that percentage translates to 74,000 people. Do you know the definition of “food insecure”? It means, “I do not know from where my next meal comes.”

When the Jews demand a plain answer to who Jesus is, he tells them he has already answered their question. The problem for the questioners is that Jesus answered with his works rather than his words. The role of Jesus and his identity cannot be reduced to a title, even if it is Messiah. To fully understand who Jesus is, his role and title must be experienced. That is why Jesus uses the sheep and shepherd analogy. The sheep know and trust the shepherd not because of any intellectual discernment, but rather because they have experienced the shepherd and his works. It is the same with a child trusting his or her parents because of experience, and not because of reason. It is not simply a random example when Jesus says, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Clearly, I believe that theology and study have an important place in Christian nurture. Christian apologetics clearly has a place in the life of the church. After all, the first and great command is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” Our minds must be engaged in the discernment of faith and the ways of God, but too many of us are stuck with the ghost of Descartes – I think, therefore I am. I grew up in a Presbyterian Church that excelled in thinking. I am willing to say that the church erred on the side of intellect as the primary faculty in Christian life.

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In the religion section of bookstores there are several titles, some of which are bestsellers, devoted to exposing the intellectual fallacies in traditional religious thinking. For many of us, who are faithful Christians, we respond to these books with, "Amen." It is not productive to the cause of Christianity to fight about who believes the right thing. We gain nothing if we keep faithful people entangled in words about God, rather than walking in the ways of God.

But there is something at the heart of this that is even more essential. We can probably all agree that faith is not simply an intellectual exercise. Our tradition teaches us that our faith is not simply a human deed. Our faith is based in the action of God. God initiates the relationship with us. God seeks us long before we seek God. Christ makes us his sheep; we do not make him the shepherd. That is why we celebrate the sacrament of baptism with babies. Clearly it is not because of anything the babies have done. It is God's grace poured out on them. Just as Easter is our proof that Jesus is in the hands of God, so too we celebrate this Easter season as our claim that we are in the hands of Jesus. What would it look like if we as a church lived out our faith in the confidence and trust that we have become the hands of Christ in this world? Whom are we willing to hold as the hands of Christ?

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