

C Easter 4 5.12.19

John 10:22-30

Focus Statement: Jesus loves us.

I want to do a bit of locating before we get into the meat of the Gospel text this morning.

First off, fun fact, the fourth Sunday of Easter every year is what is called Good Shepherd Sunday. It's called Good Shepherd Sunday because the Gospel reading for the fourth Sunday of Easter is always part of John, chapter ten, what is known as the Good Shepherd discourse. It's the part where Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep, who cares for the sheep, who is the gate for the sheep, who's sheep hear his voice, etc. Our readings come from what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary, which is a three year cycle of readings. So on the fourth Sunday of Easter Year A, the gospel is John chapter ten verses one through ten, Year B is verses eleven through eighteen, and today, in Year C, the reading is verses twenty-two through thirty. All this to say, while this morning we're hearing Jesus talk about sheep for the first time, those around him had been hearing this sheep talk for a while. Eighteen verses of it, to be exact. So when asked, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," if Jesus' answer, "I have told you and you do not believe," sounds a little impatient, well, he had just finished answering that question in a pretty repetitive manner, so...

Part of what's coloring my reading of our Gospel is the grief I'm feeling over the death this week of Rachel Held Evans, one of my favorite Christian writers and thinkers. Evans was my age and she died of complications from the flu. What made her such a compelling writer to myself and so many others was the honesty she brought to her questions and her faith. One of the books of hers that I keep near is titled Searching for Sundays. In it, Evans

wrote about her struggles with the church of her childhood, what in the end caused her to leave, and why she still believed in Jesus, despite all her doubts.

What drove Evans out of her faith is the same thing that has so often caused me to question mine, and maybe something you have struggled with, the seemingly unwavering assurance that Christianity is so often spoken of. Maybe you've had the experience where you're watching the news and they'll talk about the "Christian vote," and you'll think, "I don't want to vote for that." Or "Christians believe," and you think, "I don't believe that." Or "all Christians feel," and you think, "I don't." Mostly, most days, I'm pretty confident in what I think, believe, and feel about faith. I hang out with you people all the time, and our commitment as a congregation to grace and love and inclusion and justice keeps me grounded. There is a lot I don't know, and I'm ok in the not knowing. I believe that I am saved by grace alone, and that there is nothing I could ever do that could change God's love for me. I believe that to my core, with a knowledge that is not intellectual but internal. But I will tell you that even as a pastor, there are days when I'm listening to the radio or reading the paper, and I'll hear something about the Christian vote or the Christian message or the Christian media, spoken with such conviction that I'll find myself wondering, do I have this thing wrong?

"How long will you keep us in suspense," the Jews asked Jesus in our Gospel reading for this morning. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." At this point we have to tread carefully because this question, and questions like it, from a group whom John's Gospel refers to as "the Jews" has been used throughout history to permit, justify, even encourage, anti-

Semitism. It is too easy to read this passage, hear this question about “the Jews” and their rules, and to pat ourselves on the back because we are “saved by grace through faith apart from works.” But this is not a Jewish problem, this is a people problem. In the book I referenced earlier, Evans talked about sitting down with her pastor and the fourteen point doctrinal statement, a signature on which was required for membership. Now, at Trinity we don’t have a fourteen point doctrinal statement, adherence to which is required for membership. Honestly, we don’t even really have a good definition of membership. Basically, if you want to be a member here, Connie makes you lunch one Sunday, and then the next Sunday we invite you to come to the front of the congregation, we all say the Apostles Creed together, and then after worship we have cake. Connie just gave me some potential dates for the next new member luncheon, so if you’re interested joining Trinity, catch me later. We’ll pick the date that works best for most people and I’ll get a cake ordered. But, for me at least, there is always this tiny, niggling part of my brain that wonders if this grace thing really could be true. If God really could just love us unconditionally, really could forgive anything, really has space for all the doubts, fears, concerns, and questions. So I really cannot begrudge these early questioners of Jesus their question. “Tell me plainly,” I too want to ask, “just what to do, what to think, how to live, how to act, to know that I truly am living right, being right, doing right.” Tell me plainly.

To which Jesus responded, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” My sheep hear my voice. This, friends, does not often feel like an answer. My sheep hear my voice does not tell me anything about how to think or feel or act or believe. Hearing doesn’t even seem like an action I’m really able to do. Listening, I can do. I know how to

listen. But actually hearing is out of my control because hearing requires action on the part of another. Watch, we'll do an experiment. When I raise my hand, I want you to listen to me. [Raise hand, pause, lower hand.] Did you hear anything? No, because I didn't say anything. Or do anything. Honestly, I held my breath and stood really still; just to make sure you couldn't hear me breathing. But now you can hear me, not because your listening changed, but because my talking did. Hearing isn't a solo activity; it requires action on the part of another. So when Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice," he wasn't praising his sheep for their superior hearing abilities; he was pointing out the presence of his own voice in the life of his sheep. The act of hearing Jesus is Jesus' action, not ours. And hearing Jesus is not just something we do with our ears either, as we know from the story preceding this one, where the man born blind saw Jesus when the sighted Pharisees could not. Hearing Jesus for you may be the sun peaking through the clouds after a rain, or the deep breath of air when you didn't know you'd been holding your breath, the wine of communion on your tongue, or the sound of the person next to you in the pews saying the Apostles' Creed, muttering the familiar "I believe" for you on the days that you do not believe. Listening helps, sure, but listening is certainly not a prerequisite for hearing. That I stand before you today, as an ordained Lutheran clergyperson in the great state of Michigan of all places is testament to the fact that if God wants you to hear, even if you are fairly actively not listening, God has ways of getting God's point across.

"My sheep hear my voice," Jesus said. "I know them, and they follow me." I know them. Again, here, the first action, the moving action, is from Jesus. I know them. Following, dear people of God, comes not after knowing, it comes after being known. We are not disciples

because we know Jesus; we are disciples because we are known by Jesus. Because the knowing is not our own, then it makes sense that our following is not perfect, that our steps are uncertain, that we do not see the way all the time. We do not follow what we know, we follow because we are known.

If you've ever been to my Bible studies, or had conversations with me, you'll know that my faith is not one of great certainty. I don't see that as a weakness either, in fact I think it's a strength. I tend to not trust people who have all the answers, because if you have all the answers it seems like you're probably not asking good enough questions. But there is one thing I know, beyond all doubt, and more importantly beyond all reason. This isn't something I believe all the time, my brain is not big enough for that, but it is something I know from the depth of my being. That thing is this: You, I, we, are loved by God.

Unconditionally, unexplainably, not because of who we are, but because love is who God is. "My sheep hear my voice," Jesus said. "I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." Note: Jesus didn't say we will never die, never hurt, never suffer, never feel pain, but he did say that we will never perish. Suffering and death are a part of living, but as resurrection people, the promise is that that the end is never the end. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Dear people of God, you are known by Jesus. And nothing, no one, can ever change that. No matter what. Amen.