

Fellow Me

John 10:22-30

Our scripture tells of a time when Jesus debated with his religious opponents. They are walking in the portico of Solomon in the temple, at the time of the feast of Dedication—what we know as the celebration of Hanukkah, the feast that recalls God's reclaiming of Jerusalem through the heroic faith of the Maccabees. Celebrated with lighted lamps, the feast is a joyous one for Israel.

Jesus' opponents wanted Jesus to say plainly whether he was claiming to being the Messiah. John implies they asked the question not because they wanted to follow him, but so they could reject him. This was a loaded political question at any time, but especially so during a celebration that recalled the victorious Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in 167 BCE. In response Jesus says, "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me" ([v. 25b](#)). In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus says to his demanding inquirers that he has already told them plainly what they need to know. The trouble is that the way Jesus has told them is through his works. In other words, it seems that Jesus' role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead, his role and identity must be experienced. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his "works." In the same way, a child knows and trusts his or her mother because of experience, not reason, and it is not an accident that Jesus elsewhere says, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" ([Mark 10:15](#); [Luke 18:17](#)).

But about his opponents, he says, do not "believe" the testimony of Jesus' works, "because you do not belong to my sheep" ([v. 26](#)). First, he says that his "works" constitute public evidence that he bears the mantle of the Messiah. He then invokes a metaphor about sheep to explain why his opponents fail to understand and believe that testimony.

The Jews, the Christians, and the Greeks who may have read John's account of Jesus' ministry recognized that the imagery of the shepherd is a powerful messianic image in Israel's collective memory and of political and spiritual leadership. Each group had literature of both good and wicked shepherds ([Ezekiel 34](#)). John portrays Jesus as the good Shepherd, the authentic bearer of God's caring authority. When Jesus says to his critics, "You do not belong to my sheep," he implies that they are wicked. They cannot see the truth of his testimony because they follow wicked shepherds, wicked leaders.

Jesus says that the sheep of his fold "hear [his] voice" and "follow [him]" ([v. 27](#)). It is the unity of hearing *and* doing that binds the sheep of Jesus' fold to him. In that unity, the disciples' relationship to Jesus is similar to Jesus' relationship to the Father. Jesus rewards their faithfulness with "eternal life" ([v. 28](#)). As the Maccabean martyrs are immortal and will always be remembered by the feast of the Dedication of Jerusalem—so the disciples of Jesus' flock will be immortal because of their dedication to Jesus.

After saying his sheep "will never perish," Jesus says, "No one will snatch them out of my hand." This is an amazing image of salvation: being in the protective hands of Christ, hands that would be so horribly wounded at the cross. Jesus then underscores his own dependence on the Father: "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" ([v. 29](#) NIV). John's theological points are,

first, that Jesus and the Father are unified in their common purpose, and, second, that because they are in Jesus' "hand," the disciples will remain faithful to him and continue his work. Jesus' conclusion, "I and the Father are one," is a claim to unity of purpose. He is saying that he and God are *united* in the work that they do. It is impossible to distinguish Jesus' work from God's work, because Jesus shares fully in God's work."

As we reflect on our salvation in Christ this Sunday, this scripture reminds us we are in the "hand" of Jesus. Just as Easter is proof for Christians that Jesus is ultimately in the hands of God, not in the hands of the emperor or in the hands of death, so in our celebration we claim that we are in Jesus' hands, not in the hands of other powers. What might it mean for us to live out of that confidence and trust, and so become the hands of Christ in the world? Whom are we willing to hold on to, as we are in the hands of Christ? Whom are we to hold? (**Joseph A. Bessler**)

There will always be a role for Christian apologetics. After all, the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" ([Matt. 22:37](#); [Mark 12:30](#) and [Luke 10:27](#) add "with all your strength"). Our minds must be engaged in the discernment of faith and the ways of God, but many of us must realize that we often rely too much on the intellect as the primary faculty in the Christian life. But, fighting about who believes the right things about God can keep faithful people entangled with words about God, instead of walking in the ways of God. Without denying the importance of the mind in faith, we should focus on helping Christians return to an authentic experience of God, recognizing that this experience will be beyond our understanding and powers of description. After all, the early church grew dramatically, not because multitudes were convinced of the truth of creeds

and dogmas, but because multitudes experienced the living Lord and a new life that was foolishness to the wise ([1 Cor. 1:27](#)).

The Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello told a parable he entitled "The Explorer," which illustrates our predicament. In it, a person leaves his home village to explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. When he returns to his village, the villagers are captivated as the explorer tries to describe his many experiences, along with the incredible beauty of the place, with its thundering waterfalls, beautiful foliage, and extraordinary wildlife. How can he put into words, though, the feelings that flooded his heart when he heard the night sounds of the forest or sensed the dangers of the rapids? So he tells them they simply must go to the Amazon themselves. To help them with their journey, the explorer draws a map. Immediately the villagers pounce on the map. They copy the map, so that everyone can have his or her own copy. They frame the map for their town hall and their homes. Regularly they study the map and discuss it often, until the villagers consider themselves experts on the Amazon—for do they not know the location of every waterfall and rapids, every turn and bend?

People will often press their pastors and fellow Christians to "tell us plainly" about the things of God, and the ability to speak eloquently of one's faith and journey is a wonderful gift. The most important task, however, might be to encourage and support others in making their own personal journeys and experiencing the living Lord themselves. For, as DeMello suggests in his parable, there can be a certain futility about drawing maps—however plain and explicit they might be—for armchair explorers. **Gary D. Jones**

Jesus explains to see the deeds of the Son and to hear his words is to see and hear God the Father. The story of Jesus reveals the character of God.

This oneness also reveals the character of those who belong to Jesus. This means that the sheep of Jesus cannot be snatched away, therefore they also follow him. (**Lewis R. Donelson**)

God seeks us out long before we seek God. Christ makes us his sheep; we do not make him our shepherd. The initiative and sovereignty of God, though transfigured into Christian terms by the gospel, has ancient roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the great pastoral passages in the Psalms: "The LORD is my shepherd.... He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters" ([Ps. 23:1-2](#)), and "Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" ([Ps. 100:3](#)).

In a real sense John is affirming the divine initiative and sovereignty that are characteristic of the very tradition that Jews love and honor, including the Jews who are questioning Jesus! For John, this ancient pattern finds its most perfect expression in the incarnation and ministry of Christ.

We can celebrate the grace we find in Christ. We can profess anew the initiative and sovereignty of God. We can affirm our gratitude for the eternal life Christ gives us, for the enduring assurance that no matter what the future holds, God's hand is holding us and nothing can snatch us away ([vv. 28-29](#)). (**Thomas H. Troeger**) With that blessed assurance we can recommit ourselves to follow Jesus as Jesus followed God.

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