

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter,²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me,²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.³⁰ I and the Father are one." (John 10:22-30)

Be Sheep!

One day when I was a vicar, I taught a catechism lesson about Jesus the Good Shepherd. I made the point that if Jesus is the shepherd, then we are the sheep. Well, one student in the seventh grade class blurted out, "I ain't no sheep!" You can understand why he felt that way, right? If someone calls us a bunch of sheep, it's not a compliment. It means that we blindly follow without thinking for ourselves. No American wants to be called a sheep. Yet, Jesus uses that picture of a shepherd and his sheep. And it doesn't bother us because Jesus' point is totally different. Yet, there is some common ground between Jesus and people use calling people sheep as an insult. You see, sheep are not very intelligent animals. They have no natural defenses against predators. They need a shepherd or they will die. Jesus was making that point. We need the shepherd or we will die spiritually. If we really want to be frank about it, spiritually speaking, we are too stupid and too weak to make it to heaven on our own. That's a really hard thing for people today to accept, but you cannot reach heaven until you give up any thought that you're smart enough or strong enough or good enough to make it on your own. Jesus wants you to make it, and that's the point of what he was saying today. Because he loves us, he is our Good Shepherd. My friends, **be his sheep!**

I.

The difference between the modern insult of calling people sheep and what Christ was saying when he calls us his sheep is that pronoun "his." Jesus is the difference. He overcomes all our weakness and spiritual stupidity and he brings us home. Everyone who trusts in him understands that. In fact, that's what makes us his sheep. My friends, **be his sheep! His sheep listen to Jesus.**

Jesus spoke the words in our text in Jerusalem during the Feast of Dedication. Do you know which Jewish holiday that is? It's Hanukah. This is the only reference to Hanukah in all of Scripture, because it celebrates events that took place between the Old and New Testaments. But it was a holiday and Jesus was at the temple. John says that **"the Jews gathered around him."** Who does he mean? Almost everyone in Jerusalem was Jewish. But in John's gospel, "the Jews" serves a term for the Jesus' enemies. It probably means the leaders and teachers among the Jewish religious and political sects. These Jewish leaders said, **"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."**

Of course, they weren't asking about Jesus' name. "The Christ" is Jesus' title. He is Jesus the Christ or the Messiah. They were asking Jesus to declare publicly whether he was the promised Savior or not. Jesus answered, **"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep."** There's nothing insulting in calling us his sheep in that sentence, is there? Jesus had said, repeatedly, that he was the promised Savior. He had called himself the Christ. He had done all the things that God had promised the Messiah would do. He had healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind and made the lame walk and the mute speak. These were signs God had given in the Old Testament to recognize the real Messiah when he came. Jesus did all those things openly. The problem was the hardness of their hearts. They didn't believe.

That was true because they were not his sheep. He says, **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."** What does it mean to be Jesus' sheep? It means to hear and recognize the voice of our Savior in the gospel. It means to trust in him and to follow him – to believe in him. So if you don't believe in him, clearly you are not his sheep. Yes, it is true that in that picture we find the ideas that modern man finds so insulting: we are weak, we are foolish and shortsighted, we are helpless and we need the Shepherd to protect us and to care for us and to bring us home to heaven. And yes, we do follow him without question. He decides

what we believe and what we don't. It isn't up to us to use our human reason to determine which parts of the word we buy and which parts we don't. We don't get to say to ourselves, "I like seeing babies baptized, so I'll accept that teaching. But this stuff about the body and blood of Christ being in the bread and wine seems like superstition to me." Or "When Jesus tells us to love one another, that makes sense. But this not praying with other Christians, and not going to communion in other churches, and not joining in interfaith services when tragedies happen – that just doesn't fly today."

We don't get to make those kinds of evaluations. Jesus' sheep hear his voice in the Scripture and they follow him. So when he says, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," we accept that in and with and under the bread and wine, we find the real body and blood of Christ, even while we admit that we can't prove it or explain it. Likewise, when Jesus says that love is living as his Father commands, we do the hard things, like testifying to the truth and separating from false teachers, because his sheep hear his voice and they follow him.

The truth is, on our own, we would be no different from those Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. We were all born unbelievers. Did you like it when I said that we were too stupid and too weak to get to heaven on our own? Or did it gall you to have to sit there and take that? Did you want to be like my catechism class student who blurted out, "I ain't no sheep"? I would understand if you felt that way. I hate it in when I don't get to argue a point. But this isn't a debate and the truth is, I'm not the one saying those things about us. Jesus is. He's the one who calls us sheep over and over again. The fact that what that means bothers us shows that our hearts and minds rebel against the way that God sees things. We were born thinking we were good enough and smart enough and strong enough to make it to heaven on our own and that was a pure lie of the devil. We were born sinners, doomed to hell.

But Jesus came and he paid for our sin. He rose from the dead and declared that all our sin is gone forever, all our hell is over and we belong to Christ. And then he came to us in that good news and he gave us faith. He made us his sheep! Now, to us, being called sheep isn't an insult. It's a testament to how close we are to our Shepherd. We know his voice and he knows us personally. And when we hear the good news of all that he has done for us, we recognize his voice and rejoice at being his sheep. Then when he speaks in his word and tells us how to live, we follow him. Not perfectly – we still struggle with temptation and with all the hard things he calls us to do. But we strive to follow him ever more closely. It is a gift and a joy to do so.

II.

In the end, recognizing our need is no shame. If you hear someone smash a window downstairs in the middle of the night, is it a sign of weakness to call 911? If your house is on fire, is it weakness to let the firemen go in and make sure everyone is safe? We're deeply grateful when a fireman or a policeman saves us from danger. So it is with Christ. He does things for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Being his sheep means being humble enough to know who we really need. My friends, **be his sheep! Jesus cares for his sheep.**

Jesus said, "**I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.**" Jesus gives us eternal life. Because you and I sin every single day, we deserve nothing but death and hell. The more we think we're good people, the more we make excuses like, "Nobody's perfect," the farther we drift from Christ. In the end, the only way to get to heaven is to recognize that Jesus gives it to us. We have it because he suffered the death and the hell that our lifetime of pride and sin deserves. We have it because he paid for all the times and all the ways we thought that we were good enough and strong enough to get to heaven on our own. He paid for all the times that we were offended that our pastor dared to call us spiritually weak and stupid. Jesus died and he paid for it all and then he rose from the dead and announced that it's all ours. We are forgiven. We will live forever.

Now, most of us are still going to die. Jesus will return and call our bodies out of the grave. But even when we die, we don't perish. We go to heaven to live with him until that day of resurrection comes. In heaven, we're free from pride and sin, free from weakness and doubt, free from all that sin makes us here. And we're free from all that sin does to us here. Jesus himself will dry our tears and we will rejoice with him while we wait for the resurrection.

But what about between now and then? Our shepherd guards us and cares for us. No one can snatch us out of Jesus' hand. That's what the devil wants to do. Every day, he tries. He tries by tempting us to indulge in those sins that our hearts love most. He leads us to daydream about things that God says are sinful. We justify

ourselves by saying that as long as we don't do anything, there's no harm. But we are sinning. The devil wants to lead us deeper and deeper into sin because he wants us to kill our faith.

When pride rules our hearts and we tell ourselves that we'll never forget what we believe because we have so much faith in God, we're setting ourselves up to fall. But when we fall, when we're crushed, when we fear that the devil is winning and we will spend eternity in hell – in other words when we recognize that we're sheep, not wolves – then Jesus comes with this tremendous promise: no one can snatch us out of his hands. Jesus is greater than the devil, greater than our sinful hearts and sinful desires. He keeps our faith alive through the gospel in the word and the sacraments.

Jesus reminds us that God the Father has given us to him. We are his sheep because God chose us. Before the world began, God knew us by name and he decided that we would believe. Then when the moment was right, he sent the gospel to us and he gave us faith. Now, God the Father preserves us in that faith to everlasting life. Just as no one can snatch us out of Jesus' hand, no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand. Jesus said, **"I and the Father are one."** And he could just as easily have added the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity, God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, work day in and day out to care for us in this world, to protect us from all harm and danger, to keep the devil at bay and the powers of sin from inflicting unnecessary pain on us. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit work through those things that we do have to suffer to strengthen our faith and they will bring us home to heaven.

That's what it means to be his sheep. And it's not insulting at all. This past week, the events in Boston and in Texas horrified us all. Two terrible explosions cost over a dozen of people their lives and many more people their ability to walk and to work. When you realize that you could be doing nothing more than standing at a finish line watching a race and a bomb could take your legs off, or you could just be at work, and something goes terribly wrong and costs you your health or your life, you realize that it's no shame to say that we need a shepherd to protect us. And the truth is, the real danger isn't physical. It's spiritual. If we lose our legs – if we lose our lives but we have Christ, we will live with him in heaven and we will rise and these bodies will be made perfect again. But if we have every good thing of this life, if we have health and friendship and good times, but we do not have Christ, we will spend eternity in hell. Because we could never get Christ on our own, our Good Shepherd comes to us and makes us his sheep. Then we hear his voice and we follow him because he gives us eternal life. No danger of this life or the life to come, no power of the devil, no attack of sinful man, can snatch us out of his hand. Amen.