Invitation to the Table

In today's reading from John's Gospel, following Jesus' teachings, you'll hear these words: *"Again **the Jews** were divided because of these words."*

The phrase, "the Jews" appears 149 times in the New Testament, 61 times in John's Gospel; and each time the reference is negative. As a result, some say Christianity is antisemitic. That conclusion is logical if one takes those references out of context.

But consider the context of the whole—what a concept! "Jesus, his disciples, and most all the earliest Christian community were Jews. The church began as a faction within Judaism. … The separation from Judaism happened over several generations.

"The Gospel of John reflects a Christian community after the separation between Jews and Christians had become clear and painful. The Johannine community feels rejected, excluded, and persecuted by the leaders of Judaism, and John calls *those leaders* "the Jews." That term is not intended as an ethnic reference. It doesn't refer to the Jewish people or Judaism as a whole. When that ethnic reference is indicated, John's word is "Israel."[1]

The Gospel of John emerges out of a context of having been rejected and excluded from the faith community that gave birth to it. It is that sense of rejection focuses the entire scenario from the Last Supper up to the arrest of Jesus in the Garden.

Within that context of rejection and exclusion, the words of Jesus at the table had special meaning within the Johannine community: "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you." That promise is repeated and fulfilled every time Christians gather around a table and break bread, and remember the one in whom there is no rejection or exclusion.

Our Hymn of Communion is #426, "The Voice of Jesus Calls His People."

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. The People's New Testament Commentary (p. 286). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Pastoral Prayer

Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe,
We praise you for your gift of creation!

As your dawn renews the face of the earth each day, bringing light and life to all creation, the day lies open before us.

And yet, it is your very light that reveals the shadows.

Lord Jesus, **Good Shepherd** of Love. As your Father—our Father—spoke the light into existence, speak peace to our turbulent lives; speak confidence to our troubled spirits and speak courage to our timid souls.

Lord Jesus, **Light of the World**, help us to reflect your light into the dark shadows that surround us.

- Where there is inhumane treatment of your children, strengthen us to plead for mercy and compassion.
- Where integrity is ignored and mocked, strengthen us to speak truth in love.
- Where there is suffering, grant us the gift of healing.
- Where there is doubt and cynicism, speak through us your message of hope.
- Where we are wronged, grant us the grace to forgive.

Lord Jesus, **Bread of Heaven**, feed us with your vision for which we pray:

> Thy Kingdom come;
> Thy will be done;
> On earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

The Good Shepherd

JOHN 10:11-21 (NRSVUE) *"I am the good shepherd. **The good shepherd** lays down his life for the sheep.* [12]*The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.* [13]*The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.* [14]*I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me,* [15]*just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.* [16]*I have **other sheep** that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.* [17]*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.* [18]*No one takes it from me, but **I lay it down of my own accord**. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."* [19]*Again **the Jews** were divided because of these words.* [20]*Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?"* [21]*Others were saying, "These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"*
The Word of God for the people of God!

Anybody still have a land line phone? Our office phone is, you know, the kind that plugs into the wall. It's one of those new-fangled ones that has a wireless receiver, but back in the day you talked through a receiver that was wired to the base. And our new-fangled one has a caller ID readout; but back in the day…

… every time the phone rang, I went on alert. When the caller asked to speak with Mr. Jimmy Robinson, I knew who it was. Nobody calls me Jimmy except my Aunt Fay and my cousin, Wanda, so the nature of the call was irritatingly clear.

With icy politeness I'd say, no, I wasn't interested in vinyl siding or new windows. I required no additional insurance. And the last thing I wanted was another magazine subscription or credit card. Please take my name off the list.

I'd hang up, resolving yet again to let the answering machine [Again, this was before voice mail. Remember: I'm two days older than dirt.] I'd resolve to let the answering machine (and you plugged that in, too) do its job of screening intruders. It all took just a moment, of course, but the damage was done.

Those calls usually came just as we sat down to dinner, when the soup was steaming hot—the way I like it. After the intrusion it was tepid. Dinner conversation—family dinner—a precious time—was disrupted. Remember family dinners?

Today's phones tell you who's calling, and sometimes even warn of a potential scam. But often, caller ID isn't even necessary. Jo Lynn or our kids or I don't identify ourselves when we call each other. We recognize each other's voices. When Jesus described "the good shepherd" in last week's text, it was about the sheep following the shepherd because they recognize his voice. Today that theme continues: *"I know my own, and my own know me…"*

Note: the sheep *follow* the shepherd; and last week the reading ended with, *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* Today, some expressions of the spirituality that bears the shepherd's name are not about *following* him; they're about *believing* in him. Faith is not about life—abundant or otherwise; in fact it

discounts the value of life as we know it. It's about getting to heaven after this life is over—just say the magic words, click your heels together three times, and you've punched your ticket to heaven; and that's all there is to it.

Now I'm not discounting the value of belief. True belief is the root of our behavior. If I observe your behavior and your relationships for a while and I can tell you what you believe—not necessarily what you ***say*** you believe. Nor do I discount the hope of eternal union with God. I do have serious issues with any belief that "abundant life" refers only to eternity after death. And I have serious issues with any belief that's okay with jerking the rug out from under poor and powerless people in the name of streamlining government and eliminating wasteful spending.

Now, sometimes politics and religion overlap; and sometimes they collide. I affirm Lincoln's quote, "That government is best that governs least," and what fool would advocate intentional "wasteful spending?" But as a Christian I also advocate mercy and compassion. Jerking the rug out from under the poor and powerless and letting them die is a strategy that's no longer political, and it's a strategy no follower of Jesus can tolerate.

Sadly, the Body of Christ has become dismembered and broken; there's no consensus understanding of "abundant life." There are those who do not recognize the voice of the shepherd. At the table, Jesus said, "One of you will betray me." And in unison the disciples responded, "Lord, is it I?" I pray that daily: "Lord, is it I?"

It is the dismembered condition of the Body of Christ that John addresses in this extended text about the Good Shepherd. There are a dozen sermons here (I promise I'll preach just one today!) I don't recall ever hearing—I know I've never preached—a sermon on verse 16: ***"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."***

The danger here for every part of the Body of Christ is that we confuse our voice with the voice of the Shepherd. "One flock; one shepherd…" And we're it!

But who are his "other sheep?"

Some say Jesus is anticipating Gentiles who will be included in the church's missionary outreach beyond the canopy of Judaism.

When Thomas heard of the resurrection he said, "I won't believe it unless I see it." Later, Jesus stood before him and said, "Here, Thomas, touch my scars," and Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said, ***"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*** Some say Jesus' "other sheep" were "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Were his "other sheep" Jewish communities—persecuted like the Johannine community? We don't know. What seems evident is that the flock is not yet finally fixed. It's open-ended. Are there always other sheep who recognize the shepherd's

voice and follow?[2] Many even suggest that people will hear the voice of the "Good Shepherd" and follow him through the teachings of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, or other spiritualities, and I would not presume to limit the scope of God's grace.

Was the Johannine community referring to various congregations of an already divided church? Judaizers had followed Paul around, undercutting his work, claiming Gentiles couldn't be Christians until they first converted to Judaism and submitted to circumcision. John's own community dealt with gnostic and docetic heresies, which said Jesus just appeared to have a physical body, it wasn't real and he didn't really die, because God can't die. The Arian heresy said the opposite: Jesus wasn't divine. He was the Son of God, but as a created being was not equal with God.

So, the church divided over doctrines and beliefs almost from the beginning. Early in the fourth century the Emperor Constatine accepted Christianity into the Roman pantheon and a decade later called together the first Christian council at Nicaea. The Nicene Creed set a new direction for Christianity and it was changed forever. Instead of an inclusive movement of following Jesus, it now was a formal institution of saying the right words or being excluded.

Division always happens when beliefs and doctrines and creeds replace the voice of the shepherd. Unity is the core of today's reading: "one flock, one shepherd." It's the core of the whole Gospel. It's tempting to bring in supporting elements from Paul (like Ephesians 1:9-10) and the other gospels, but to maintain integrity with our Johannine text, there's enough corroboration in John's own Gospel:

The theme of unity comes to a head in chapter 17: after the "Last Supper," Jesus and the disciples have gone to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays repeatedly for his followers to be 'one' with each other, but "not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." (vs. 20-21)

John convincingly connects this idea of unity with love, stressing that true unity is achieved through proactive love for one another, just as Jesus loved them (13:34).

And (spoiler alert) the secret of achieving this unity in love will be stressed in the final "I am" statement—the metaphor of the vine and the branches—staying connected—"abiding"—in him (15:4).

Our late General Minister and President, Kenneth Teagarten, said, "It is claimed that the Bible is the most read book in human history. I doubt it. It may be the most purchased book, but evidence is strong that it is not much read." Last week I quoted our current General Minister and President, Teri Hord Owens:

[2] Beverly Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching: a Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year B* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) page 305.

> "At every turn, the foundation of prayer and scripture in Jesus' life is evident. From responding to "test" questions from scribes and priests to his teaching, Jesus' practices of prayer and scripture guide him and give him wisdom to share, testimonies to make.
>
> "There are moments when we, too, can feel all is lost, that God is nowhere to be found. Only when we have committed ourselves to deep spirituality and Biblical literacy can we be fully strengthened by God's presence in those moments. Without those two powerful foundations, we are unfamiliar with how God moves, acts, and speaks."

There's a prayer song in the musical, "Godspell." It says,

Day by day, O, dear Lord, three things I pray:
To see Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly,
Day by day.

It's hard to hear the voice of the Shepherd when the cacophony of other voices are so loud. My prayer for you this morning is that you will commit to a deeper spirituality and a deeper relationship with Scripture, so that you may hear the Shepherd's voice and follow him.

Prayer Slide