

Easter 4 C Sermon  
May 8, 2021  
John 10:22-30; Acts 9:36-43

*Face to Face*  
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*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the people gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in God's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 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. What God has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of God's hand. God and I are one.'*

~o~

A man's car broke down on a country road. While he was peering under the hood to see what was wrong, a ewe-sheep trotted up to the nearby fence and looked over at the car. "Probably the ignition gone wrong," she said. The man, startled, ran off down the road until he bumped into a shepherd, and told the shepherd what had just happened. "Was it a big one with the number E457 on her back?" asked the shepherd. "Yes, I think so," said the man. "Oh, don't listen to her," said the shepherd. "She doesn't know anything about cars."

~o~

Let's be honest, sheep are fabled for their dim wits—we might even assume that sheep don't know much about anything! And yet, here we are again on Good Shepherd Sunday being compared to a flock of sheep with Jesus as our benevolent shepherd. Like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the psalm we said as our call to worship this morning, Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd to describe his relationship to his followers. Jesus states simply that “his sheep hear his voice” and “what God has given him...no one can snatch from God's hand.” But then he says something else—something truly perplexing. He says, “God (or ‘the Father’) and I are one.” It's true that elsewhere in the Gospel of John Jesus says similar things like: “whoever has seen me has seen God,” (14:9) “I am in the God and God is in me,” (14:10) and in prayer he says “As you, God, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,” (17:21). How puzzling indeed. How can one person be another person, let alone be God?

These verses have been the source of immense controversy over the centuries and they surely didn't go over too well with the folks hearing them in our reading. In fact, had we continued the story, we would have heard that the people actually grabbed the nearest rocks and were prepared to stone Jesus for blasphemy!

The debate over Jesus' relationship to Creator God didn't end with the advent of Christianity as a religion. Prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., people didn't actually agree about who Jesus was. Some believed Jesus to be entirely human while others believed him to be entirely divine and still others believed him to be both human and divine to varying degrees. Truth be told, the authors of the four biblical gospels don't agree entirely on who he was either! At the Council of Nicaea, after more heated debate, Jesus was officially declared to be "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,"<sup>1</sup> thus proclaiming his divinity and

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<sup>1</sup> The Nicene Creed, adopted 325 C.E., amended 381 C.E.

equality with God the Creator. In case you weren't sure, the controversy didn't end there either.

I certainly do not intend to reopen the debate on the divinity of Jesus this morning, however, I would like to invite us to broaden our understanding of these words of Jesus—to add another interpretive layer that might have implications not just for Jesus' identity, but ours too. First, another lectionary reading, this one from the book of Acts, the ninth chapter:

*<sup>36</sup>Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup>At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup>Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup>So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup>Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. <sup>41</sup>He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup>This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup>Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.*

This too is an interesting text would't you say? Peter, inarguably a human being, restored life to Tabitha. As people of faith, we typically regard the work of life-giving to be God's work, but the text says nothing about God. It makes me think once more of Jesus' words, "I and God are one."

To be completely honest, I think it's easy for us to hear these words and believe that Jesus was simply making a claim about *his* physical or spiritual relationship to the Divine. If we hear them as a simple declaration of fact then these words don't invite us, along with Peter, into Jesus' work. I think Jesus' point is more subtle, easier to miss. I think essentially what he's saying is this, "My intentions for humankind and God's intentions are the same. You'll never see God, but if you want to know what she looks like, look at those who do good works. Look at my works, they're God's works. Look at me, you'll see God."

Perhaps we can take it another step and look to those who, like shepherds, guide and care for others; look to those like Tabitha who provide for women in need; look to those like the widows who love their sister Tabitha in life and in death, look to those like Peter who comfort those who are grieving and, like Jesus, restore life—look to those ones and you'll see God.

And I believe we can move completely out of the vein of scriptural example and still reach the heart of Jesus' statement: look to the mother bandaging a skinned knee, look to the volunteers feeding the multitudes at the Hesed House or the Interfaith Food Pantry, look to the young child who shares a toy with another or raises money and supplies to care for orphaned animals, look to the elder who offers wise council on an important matter, look to the patient ones, the nurturing, the caring, the forgiving, the helping, the feeding, the comforting, and the guiding ones, look around you, look within you—there you will see the very face of God.

In her autobiography, "The Story of a Soul," St. Thérèse of Lisieux writes about one particular nun who got under her skin—the woman irritated her no matter what she said or did.

"As I did not want to give way to my natural dislike for her, I told myself that charity should not only be a matter of feeling

but should show itself in deeds. So I set myself to do for this sister just what I should have done for someone I loved most dearly,” Thérèse wrote.

Every time she met this nun, she prayed for her. She did things for her day after day, and when she thought she might say something unpleasant about her, she smiled instead.

“And after all this,” Thérèse writes, “she asked me one day with a beaming face, ‘Sister Thérèse, will you please tell me what attracts you so much to me? You give me such a charming smile whenever we meet,’” St. Thérèse recalled. “Ah! It was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul who attracted me, Jesus who makes the bitterest things sweet!”<sup>2</sup>

It's not always easy to see, is it? But it's there—even in the cantankerous, crotchety, and curmudgeonly—the face of God is still there. God's face is often worn by people of a different race than ours, with different political or social views than ours, with different opinions than ours—even different opinions on serious issues like the abortion debate recently rekindled in our nation. It's not always easy to see, but it's always there—the face of God is still there.

We can spend a lifetime searching for God only to find that God was never far, but comes to us in human hands, and human words, and human action, and human love, and human faces. In word and in deed, let us bear the very face of God to one another and to the world beyond these walls. Let us see the very face of God in others. And let us say with Jesus as confident declaration and as fervent prayer, “I and God are one.” Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Rossi. “Seeing Christ In Others,” Patheos.com, October 2, 2013:  
<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/christophers/2013/10/seeing-christ-in-others/>.