

Easter 5C
John 10:22-30
May 11, 2025

“Sacred Suspense”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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~

There’s an old story about a man traveling through the countryside. It was getting late and he had nowhere to spend the night. He stumbled upon a monastery. The brothers there welcomed him in and fed him and gave him a bed for the night. As he lay down to sleep, he heard a most unusual sound. At breakfast he asked the brothers what made the sound, but all they said is, “We can’t tell you. You’re not a monk.” Driven mad by curiosity, the man responded, “How do I become a monk?” The monks replied, You must traverse the earth and determine the number of blades of grass in all the fields and the number of grains of sand on all the beaches.

Some 54 years later, the man returned to the monastery. He gathered the monks together and announced, “I have traversed the earth and have found

what you have asked for. There are 145, 236, 284, 232 blades of grass and 231, 281, 219, 999, 129, 382 sand pebbles on the earth.” Impressed, the monks joyfully welcomed him into their order, led him to a wooden door, and said, “The source of the sound is behind that door.” The man turned the knob, but the door was locked. He waited impatiently as one of the monks fumbled for the key and then went through. Next, he found a door of stone and once again, it was locked. He waited impatiently as the monk found the key and then went through only to find a locked door made of ruby. Through the ruby door was one of sapphire, and then one of emerald, and one of silver, and one of topaz, and finally, one of amethyst. “This is the key to the last door,” the monk said. Relieved, the man unlocked the last door, turned the knob, and discovered to his eternal amazement, the source of that most unusual sound. Sadly, he can’t tell you because you’re not a monk.¹

That’s a great story, right? It catches you and drags you along wondering, “What is the source of that most unusual sound?” Suspense. Hitchcock couldn’t have told it better! Maybe John could have, though.

In the text we heard moments ago from John’s gospel, we learn that the people are in terrible suspense over whether or not Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one that would liberate the Hebrew people and usher in an age of peace. Despite the fact that from the very beginning, the author describes Jesus as the Word that was with God and was God²; despite the fact that in the first pronouncement made about Jesus in the gospel, John the Baptizer declares him to be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”³ and “the Son of God”⁴; and despite the fact that Jesus himself had previously admitted to the Samaritan Woman that he was the messiah, the Christ, the people, John tells us, were still in suspense and

¹ “The Monk Story with a Great Suspense,” Upjokes.com: <https://upjoke.com/suspense-jokes>.

² John 1:1, NRSV.

³ John 1:29, NRSV.

⁴ John 1:34, NRSV.

demanding of Jesus, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” The suspense was just too much.

Debate continues to this day about who Jesus was and how to apply his message to our lives and the life of the world. Contemporary Jesus-followers in our communities range from Christian Nationalists, to Progressive Christians, and doctrinally orthodox Christians, and Christian Pacifists, and Anabaptist Christians that don’t participate in civil society at all. A few years ago, random people walking in New York City’s Washington Square Park were asked the question: “Who is Jesus?” Their responses include: “a historical figure,” “a normal person like us,” “a selfless person,” “a man,” “a marketing genius,” “an ancient David Copperfield,” “God’s son, as was Gandhi and Mohammad—all of us are God’s children,” “someone I pray to,” “my lord and savior,” “not the Son of God,” “a messenger,” “morally and religiously enlightened,” “someone who tried to make the world a better place,” “someone who saw something that a lot of people didn’t see and don’t see in others: a lot of love and hope,” “my closest friend,” and “I don’t know.”⁵

As the author of Ecclesiastes once wrote:

*What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.*⁶

People questioned Jesus’ identity then and people still question Jesus’ identity now. If only our text from John’s gospel could shed light on the question. And of course, it can.

⁵ ChristLife. “Who Is Jesus?” Youtube.com, March 31, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCf6Qy3j3Y4>.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:9, NRSV.

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 . . . God and I are one.'

While Jesus' answer certainly invites additional questions, it also provides some answers. First, Jesus claims that his identity is evident in the work he does. In John's gospel, Jesus changes water into wine; heals a royal official's son; heals a paralytic; feeds 5,000; walks on water; heals a blind man; and raises Lazarus from the dead. He calls fishers to be friends; mingles with Samaritans; disrupts the Temple marketplace; saves a woman from stoning; speaks hard-to-hear words to people in power; weeps for his dead friend; has women in his inner circle; washes the disciples' feet; and commands his followers to love one another just as he loves them. That's the work he does: teaching, healing, feeding, preaching truth to power, serving, loving, and including those society deemed to have little value. Jesus told the people they should know who he is by the work he does.

And second, if the work wasn't enough to prove his identity, Jesus says this: "God and I are one." There's no question that the author of John's gospel believed Jesus to be divine. They state it clearly in chapter one. However, scholars point out that the particular Greek word used for 'one' here, indicates a functional oneness. "Jesus is not [saying that he is] equal to God in essence, as later creeds will affirm, but functionally. He and God function, work in the same way. They are united in the work they do."⁷ This nuance in no way diminishes the author's claim of divinity for Jesus, but it does add clarity to our understanding of this particular statement. "Jesus and God are united by the work that they do. Jesus' work and God's work cannot be distinguished, because Jesus shares fully in God's work."⁸ To see the work of Jesus, is to see the work of God.

⁷ Osvaldo Vena, "Commentary on John 10:20-30," Workingpreacher.org, March 12, 2019: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-1022-30-4>.

⁸ Commentary by Gail R. O'Day. "The New Interpreter's Study Bible." Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003. Pages 1929.

Likewise, when Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue his work in the text we studied last Sunday, to love and care for his sheep, he commissioned them for his work, which is God's work. And friends, that is our work. Our work is to continue Jesus' work, which is God's work, and thereby transform the world in the image of the Divine. That's how other's will know we're really who *we* say *we* are when we claim the name 'Christian.' By the work.

The truth is, labels themselves don't really matter. The particular variety of Christian that we claim to be doesn't really matter. Neither do our creeds or statements of faith. Neither does our theological purity, or our level of orthodoxy—of right belief—at least not to the people who don't find themselves in any of our Jesus-centric affinity groups. What does matter is the work. What people do see is the work. What people will believe is the work. The work speaks for itself. And that is the work of teaching, healing, feeding, preaching truth to power, serving, loving, and including those society deems to have little value. That's the work Jesus said should have showed the people who he was. And that's the work that will show our community and our world if we are who we say we are. Let's not keep people in suspense. May it be so. Amen.