

Rev. David R. Solum  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
May 3, 2020  
Immanuel Lutheran, Michigan City  
John 10:1-10

Jesus' teaching in John chapter ten follow His healing of the blind man, in which the Jewish leaders were looking for any way to accuse Jesus of wrongdoing, even though He clearly performed a miracle. He called them blind because they would not see their own guilt. They wanted to have salvation their own way, through their works, and not through Christ. And they taught others the same. This led to Jesus' Good Shepherd sermon. The division with chapter ten is kind of arbitrary, since Jesus simply continues speaking to the same audience. After calling the Jewish leaders blind, Jesus called them thieves and robbers and hired hands who run from danger. It's no wonder that by then end of this talk, they were calling Him demon-possessed. Preachers who have stood on Christ's word and called out false teachers have been called worse.

Today it is considered arrogant to say that you are right and know and teach the truth, especially when the truth doesn't line up with popular opinion. It's considered mean-spirited to warn against false teaching and to call false teachers to repentance. Even many Christians feel this way, though they would have to ignore a whole lot of dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes. And they'd have to ignore the letters of the Apostles Paul and Peter, which point out specific false teachings and teachers and tell the congregations to stay away from them.

But we have a hard time with this, partly, I think, because we've been the dominant religion in the United States for so long, we became cowardly. We've enjoyed being comfortable and liked,

so we have the tendency to want to run away from suffering, which includes avoiding disagreement at all costs. So, we let things slide and keep everything P.C., even if that means allowing for false teaching here or there. We'd rather make everyone happy than to stand alone on the Word of God.

I think we also shy away from disagreement because false teachers really are wolves in sheep's clothing. I'm not sure we always believe that. We think that their disguise will be like the big bad wolf with its big sharp teeth and long nose hanging out of a granny's bonnet. It's really easy to avoid wolves who look and act like wolves. Like the one who embezzled money or the angry and hateful preacher who loves to tell people they're going to hell. We can easily point them out and very few would have a problem with us. But most false teachers are likeable, nice, popular people. And their teachings are nuanced enough that they sound good and probably make us feel good.

This past Easter, Dr. Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York was interviewed in the New York Times and very explicitly denied Jesus' virgin birth, the atonement of the cross, and the resurrection. When she received some push back from Christians, she said in an open letter, "I wish I could have expanded and nuanced my responses, as I have done for decades in my writings and teachings." In other words, she would've spoken in a way that wouldn't have offended anyone and everyone would remain happy in whatever they believed. Perhaps she would've been vague enough in her answers and use enough Biblical terminology, that no one would've discovered that her teachings weren't Christian.

Another reason we downplay the seriousness of false doctrine is that we view doctrine as a series of abstract and unrelated statements put together by man, so that we're fine as long as we agree on what we feel to be most of the points or some of the major points. But if we understand Scripture to be the voice of Christ, inspired by His Spirit, by which He calls us and leads us to eternal life, we will not so easily disregard doctrine. We will see that doctrine is all related to our salvation because it is the voice of our Savior.

Some would be surprised to hear that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, on their twitter and facebook accounts this last week, addressed a prayer to "Mother God," but I am not. Just as I wasn't surprised when they have denied the atonement or supported other paths to God than the Christian faith. A long time ago, at their founding, they fell short on one seemingly small doctrine. They believed differently about Scripture. For them Scripture is *a* word of God or *contains* God's word, but it isn't *the* inerrant word of God. This gives them the ability to listen to other voices than Christ our shepherd. Now we see that their one teaching has led to many false teachings.

Christ's sheep will flee such strange voices and follow Christ's Word, wherever it is taught in its truth and purity. Consider the example of the early church. In our reading from Acts chapter two, those who believed and were baptized "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The Greek word translated "devoted" comes from the root word which means to endure or remain strong in suffering. This word is used several times in Acts and the Epistles to emphasize a dedication to God's Word and prayer and the sacraments, even in the face of persecution and suffering. We remain committed, not to

the whims and wishes of the culture or the musings of human reason or to whatever feel-good sayings we read on facebook memes or in popular books, but to the teaching of the apostles, even when it is unpopular or such churches are persecuted. And be careful, it is especially in times of crisis like these, when strange teachings and practices tend to show themselves. We are not to let circumstances dictate our theology. Christ does not change. His promises and commands are immovable.

We follow, as always, the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd, because we are His sheep. Sheep are cute, but aren't especially admirable creatures. They really have no advantage for survival as a species. They don't have cunning instincts, but rather wander and get lost easily. They aren't brave, fierce, powerful, fast, armored or camouflaged. They're easy prey for wolves and lions. One would expect them to go extinct, except for one little skill: they listen to their shepherd's voice. And under his care they have the advantage over every creature. They are watched and guarded and led to water and good pasture and have no need.

If it were up to us, we'd wander far from God and allow ourselves to be torn apart by sin and devoured by the devil. Our chances of survival would as good as a lone sheep in the wilderness. But our Shepherd came that we would have life abundantly. He is no coward. He stood between us and the grave and poured out His blood for our sins. The Shepherd became the sheep. Full of our sins, Christ allowed Himself to be the prey, so that all our enemies would have their fill of Him instead of us. And He rose from the grave on the third day, proving that His word is true and our salvation is won. And to the risen Christ, the Father has given His sheep. He called us by name out of the desert of this world and bade us quench our thirst with living water. He

opened our ears to recognize His voice and follow Him. He gathered us into His flock that together we would go in and out and find pasture. With the rod of His mouth Christ wards off thieves who come to steal and kill and destroy. And He chastises us when we stray, but gently prods us back with the words of Absolution. He feeds us with food that leads to eternal life, so that, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil. And He assures us that no one will snatch us out of His hand.

Let us then go with rejoicing and follow wherever He leads. It might be a lonely road sometimes, but no other voice can bring comfort and joy and peace like His. Amen.