

## “Who?”

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### **John 10:22-30**

<sup>22</sup>At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. <sup>24</sup>So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”<sup>25</sup>Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one.”

One of the most classic bits of comedy is the Abbott and Costello sketch called, “Who’s on First?” I would guess that nearly everyone has heard this countless times, but just in case – or, perhaps just because I want an excuse to play “Who’s on First?” in church – I’m going to play just a little bit of the sketch. Here goes: [{play audio clip}](#)

In thinking about today’s Gospel lesson, that sketch comes to my mind. Costello cannot understand what Abbott is telling him. It is like they are speaking a different language. No matter how many times Abbott tells him that the name of the man playing first base is “Who,” Costello just doesn’t get it. The sketch is quite clever in how it uses humorous names, *Who, What, I Don’t*

*Know*, and several others. It's clear to the audience both what the players' names are *and* why Costello is confused.

And I think that we, the audience of the Gospel story we read today, are in a similar position. John tells us that those gathered around said to Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." And Jesus replied, *not so* plainly, "I have told you, and you do not believe." And their response is not recorded, but I think it might have been something like, "You told us already? You did? *Who?* Who is the Messiah?"

We understand that Jesus is the Messiah, but it's also easy to understand why they are confused. There's a little detail in this story that we generally read past. The first line of our text for today was this: "At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem." The Festival of Dedication commemorated a military-religious triumph. Under the leadership of Judah Maccabee, which translates to "Judah the Hammer", the Syrians were kicked out. While the Syrians had been there, they constructed a pagan altar within the temple, and that altar was now torn down. A new altar was constructed and sanctified. The Hebrew victors celebrated, confident that God's presence had once again been established and ensconced within the temple. This is what was commemorated every year at the Festival of the Dedication. And *this* is the context of what we read today. This reclaiming of the temple, made possible by the military victory of Judah the Hammer, was what they were celebrating when Jesus was strolling through the temple.

And Jesus did not look like any "Judah the Hammer" or talk like one either. At this time, the Jews were looking for a Messiah who would run the Romans out of town, just like Judah had run out the Syrians. But Jesus did not speak of kicking the Romans out of town. Jesus talked about being a "Good Shepherd." Jesus spoke of self-sacrifice. Jesus said the faithful were "sheep," not mighty warriors. They asked whether Jesus was the Messiah, and He said, "I already told you!" They just couldn't get it because Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they were looking for.

It just didn't make sense. They didn't get it. Jesus said, "you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." And we've got the familiar image of shepherd and sheep. Jesus told Peter, "feed my sheep." We are the sheep of Jesus' pasture. He is our shepherd.

And that's an image that maybe we don't really like. There's a story told of a man who one Sunday morning, following the church service, accosted the pastor and said, "Tom, this church has been insulting me for years, and I did not know it until this week." The stunned pastor replied, "What on earth do you mean?" "Well," said the man, "every Sunday morning the call to worship in this church ends with the words, 'We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.' And I have heard ministers over the years call the congregation, 'God's flock.' Then this past week, I visited the Chicago stockyards. There I discovered that sheep are just about the dumbest animals God ever created. Why, they are so stupid that they even follow one another docilely into the slaughterhouse. So I'm not at all sure I want to come to church and be called a 'sheep' any longer...even God's sheep."

Others will say that sheep really *are* smart; they are just quite different from the American Western idea of cattle. The American story tells of cowboys and cows, and how the cowboy wrangles the cows. We idealize the way the cowboy has to struggle to get the cattle to do what he wants. We even stage rodeos where people *for fun* lasso bulls and work to outsmart or outmaneuver them. But sheep aren't like that. They don't like to be driven from place to place. They want to *follow* their shepherd. They will follow their shepherd wherever he leads them because they have learned to know him and trust him. They are not easily distracted by another shepherd. Move three flocks into a field, place three shepherds at three strategic points and have each of them issue a call. The sheep will sort themselves. You will not need brands to recognize which sheep belongs to which shepherd. Each sheep will only follow their own shepherd.

And that's the image that Jesus gives for us. We are sheep. And Jesus says that if we are *His* sheep, then we will hear His voice and follow. The test is in whether we follow. There are so many other voices calling us. Our world is filled with competing shepherds calling for us to follow them. The voice of materialism wants us to believe that all we need can be found in the physical world, not in God. The voice of consumerism calls us to fulfill our envy by overspending on vacations, cars, clothing and a home. The voice of entertainment wants to fill our lives with television, movies, and games that grab our attention and isolate us from one another. Only the voice of Jesus, our true Shepherd, can offer us eternal life. Jesus says that no one can snatch us out of His hand, if only we will follow Him.

And the image of shepherd and sheep is just *one* way that Jesus used to try to get people to understand who He is. It's a pretty common image in scripture, but that is likely because the image of shepherd and sheep meant a lot more in that culture than it does in ours. But it's not the only image that Jesus used for Himself. In the Gospel according to John, we see several images. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." He said, "I am the light of the world." He said, "I am the gate." He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." And He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Most of those are metaphors, images for who Jesus is. They are ways of representing to our finite human minds the infinite truth of who Jesus is. No one image can do that job. Actually, all of the images *together* cannot do the job. Each one adds a bit to our understanding, but the thing is that you really cannot understand Jesus by a literal analysis. To try to understand Jesus, you have to listen for His voice. You have to become one of His sheep. I think the sheep and shepherd metaphor is a very valuable one because calling us sheep implies that we belong to one another, that we need one another. And that is certainly true. We are the sheep of God's flock. We are not whole without one another. We were made for community. The Christian theologian and professor Stanley Hauerwas observes, "The work of Jesus was not a new

set of ideals or principles for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline.” Jesus came to establish a new community, one that didn’t behave like the old community, one that worked together for the good of all, one that worked together to help God’s kingdom come to life, here on earth, as it is in heaven.

That is what we are called to do. To follow the voice of our shepherd, to partake of the bread of life, to go through the gate, to follow the way, to be the branches of the vine, to be whichever metaphor – or whichever combination of metaphors –works best for you. The bottom line is to not be confused like old Costello. Listen for the voice of Jesus and follow, for He *is* the way, the truth, and the life. Be part of the community of faith, be part of the new way of life that Jesus came to begin here on earth. Let us together listen for the voice of Jesus and follow where He leads us. Amen.