

John 10:22-30

There is a bumper sticker that I see every now and then, but it's only on certain vehicles. It reads: "It's a Jeep thing...you wouldn't understand." And I admit that I don't understand. I don't own a Jeep, and I may never own one. So I may live my entire life not understanding the Jeep thing. In our text, Jesus tells the Jews who had gathered around Him, and who were not believing His words and His works, something like this: "It's a sheep thing...you wouldn't understand." These Jews were upset. "*Tell us plainly,*" they demanded, "*If you are the Christ!*" But even as these were angrily confused about Jesus, His sheep were happily following Him. They had no doubt as to who He was. They listened to Jesus and they followed Him because they were His sheep.

The people then, and so many today, will never figure out this sheep thing, because to understand Jesus--to love Him, and hear Him, and follow Him, you have to be one of His sheep. But the sheep thing is that we cannot become sheep of Jesus just because we want to. Becoming a sheep does not involve our reasoning brain and our deciding will. It's not like sheep have to take a test before they become sheep. Even confirmands who pass their examination and are handed their confirmation certificate were sheep long before that. Sheep are born, not made. Jesus' sheep are born into His family, born into His kingdom of grace, through the washing of Holy Baptism. So those Jews who were angry with Jesus, who wanted plain talk and plain answers, were never going to understand this sheep thing because they were not Jesus' sheep. His words entered their ears, and they followed Him for answers, but they were not His sheep.

"My sheep hear My voice," He says, *"And I know them, and they follow Me, and I give them eternal life."* You are here today because you understand this sheep thing. You are here to listen to the voice of Jesus not because God commands it of you, or else, but because you are Jesus' sheep. Sheep recognize, more than anything else, the voice of their shepherd. There can be a dozen shepherds all calling out to their sheep at the same time, and all within the same sheep pen, but even with so many shepherds, each sheep will come running only to its particular shepherd. This is what sheep do.

And so with you. What a sad thing it would be for parents to have their baby baptized, but then fail to bring their baby to the voice of the Shepherd over and over, so that their child does not grow up recognizing the voice of the Good Shepherd. We become sheep in Holy Baptism, and then we learn to know the voice of our Shepherd through Bible stories in the home, through hearing about Jesus day after day from parents, and Sunday School teachers, and from the pastor. We sheep learn our Shepherd's voice from the hymns we sing here in church and from the liturgy within the Divine Service.

Many of you know that my mother suffers from Alzheimer's Disease. She does not know any more what her husband's name was--my dad. But she knows the 23rd Psalm, and the Lord's Prayer, and she sings with my brother hymns she learned as a little girl, and she finishes saying Bible verses that he begins. She does not know what is going on in the world. She does not know what is happening in the world of politics, and sports, but she still knows the voice of her Good Shepherd. Why? Because like so many of you, she learned to know His voice from little on up.

This does not mean that unless you learn the voice of the Good Shepherd as a child, you will not learn to recognize it as one of His sheep. Start now, if you haven't already. Do not close your hymnal, but sing with the congregation. Open your Bible more in your home. Listen more here in church. It's what sheep do. And you, as Jesus' sheep, will know your Shepherd's voice so well that in good times, and

through tough times; in joys, and in sorrow; and even when your mind becomes feeble, you will still know your Shepherds' voice.

Jesus knows His sheep. We hear His voice and recognize it, but He is the one who knows you. Even a little baby, just baptized, who does not know its own name, is known by Jesus. Even when you forget why you came into a room, or whether you're going upstairs or downstairs, and have to think about it in the middle of the staircase...even when all you know is pain, and sickness, and troubles, Jesus still knows you.

Now we might think that if He knows us so well, He surely is often disappointed in us, often angry with us, because he knows our hidden thoughts, He knows the sins we try to cover up, He knows the darkness in our past. Friend, Jesus knows you as one of His sheep, and His sheep are sinful sheep--all of them are. If you do not think you are a sinner; if you're doing pretty well with keeping the Commandments of God, then you are not one of Jesus' sheep. His sheep are pathetic. I can say this because I'm one of them. Jesus' sheep are always pictured as white fluffy things. That's hardly true. We look more like mangy dogs who have been out in the rain and mud. Even with attempting to cover up the filth of our sins, we stand out as sheep that are stained, dirty, and wretched.

But this is why you have a Good Shepherd. Jesus did not come because we were so good that He just had to become our Shepherd. We are miserable sinners, you and I. This is our condition. And this is why Jesus claimed you for His own. It's why He went to the cross to die for you. It's why He washed you in His blood in the cleansing of your baptism. It's why He feeds you at the pasture here at His altar, giving you forgiveness, life, and salvation with His flesh and blood. Jesus knows His sheep. He knows them the way a mother knows her nursing child. He knows you as sheep who are forgiven. He made this happen by His death for you. He knows you in love, in mercy, in pity.

And that's why you follow Him. You don't follow Jesus so that you can become His sheep. You follow Him because you are His sheep. *"My sheep follow Me,"* He says. He doesn't say that His sheep follow Him in a way that is flawless and perfect. We follow Him as sinful sheep, and this means that we need His help to be better followers, and we need His forgiveness for following so poorly. And you have both. Do you want to follow Jesus better? Then get to know His voice better. Stay close to His Word. Make church the top priority on Sundays. Consider coming to Bible Class and Sunday School. Open your catechism and start memorizing. You have His promise that through these, you will be better followers. Not better sheep, better followers. It's not the best sheep who make it to heaven--it's the sheep who keep listening to Jesus' voice and keep following Him--for these are His true sheep. *"My sheep hear My voice...and they follow Me...(and to these, He says), I give eternal life."*

Jesus does not give life to only His sheep who reach a high standard, who live good, or at least pretty good lives. That's not the sheep thing. The sheep thing makes no sense to the world. It makes no sense to all who are not Jesus' sheep. But the sheep thing is believed by His sheep--it's a gift of faith from God. And the sheep thing is that we do not earn eternal life by what we do and how we live. It's a gift. *"I give (My sheep) eternal life."* Since it's a gift, it's yours not because of how you look as a sheep, not because of how you live as a sheep...it's what your Good Shepherd gives you in mercy. He forgives you for being a poor listener to His voice. He forgives you for being a poor follower. He forgives you for being so pathetic. And within the hand of your Good Shepherd, the hand which gives you forgiveness here at His altar through bread and wine, there is also eternal life for you. The same hand that feeds you the blessing of forgiveness, gives you, without any merit on your part, eternal life in heaven.

That's the sheep thing--that you have a Shepherd who is good, that you have a Shepherd who loves you, that you have a Shepherd who died for you, that you have a Shepherd who forgives you, that you have a Shepherd who gives you eternal life. And because you are Jesus' sheep, you believe the sheep thing. You listen, you follow, you believe. It's what sheep do. Amen.