

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Duane Hanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

## The Sermon Text — John 10: 22-30 SERMON

Who are you? Never before has that question been more relevant as we go about our daily lives. If you have flown on an airplane recently you know how important it is to have proper identification. You know that once you get beyond the ticket counter you will be greeted by people who work for the TSA. It is their job to validate your identity. It begins rather simply. Does your driver's license name match your airline ticket? Does your driver's license or passport picture match who they see? If flying out of the country, your passport will need to be correct and precise. Pity the person whose description matches a person on the no fly list. Every so often, a case of mistaken identity surfaces and it presents lots of grief for the traveler. In the case of the airline traveler, the people working for the TSA want to make sure that you are a responsible citizen who has no intent of interfering with the flight of an airplane. It is vital that you have proper identification. To have any kind of red flags in the TSA file will likely ground you. There can be no confusion as to your identity.

Our text from John today essentially asks the same question, "Who are you?" Now they knew that this man they were talking with was Jesus. But that did not reveal his identity. Jesus was beginning to have a couple of identities; he was thought by many to be the Messiah and by others to be the person in whom people encountered God. At first glance we may not see the contradiction in that statement. But to the Jew it was blasphemous. On the one hand, if Jesus were the Messiah then he would only be human, an earthly ruler, much like King David. But there were greater concerns. It became obvious that the Jews were concerned about his second identity, that of being one with God. And so the search for his real identity was on.

The setting was not without drama. It was winter. Jesus was walking in the protected part of the temple, in the portico of Solomon. Our text reads: "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.'" We need to recognize that the gospel writer John is not describing a casual, friendly gathering of the curious around a visitor. Rather, the scene would suggest to Jews of the time a court whose members sat in a semicircle round the person brought before it. If effect, when Jesus was asked to tell plainly as to whether or not he was the Christ, he was being asked for explicit, unequivocal evidence that could be used in a trial to bring an accusation against him.

It is helpful for us to pause at this point and ask the question: "Why the suspense? Why the urgency? Why the rush to judgment? Why were the Jews so anxious to nail down the identity of Jesus? It's interesting to note that there are some clues to their concerns in the very beginning of the story. These are clues, which we might pass by. Recall the opening sentence at the beginning of the story: "At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem."

It's an interesting little frame to the story. For to know a bit about the Festival adds insight to the encounter which follows. So let's take a minute and review the setting. The Festival of the Dedication is sometimes called the Festival of Lights. Its Jewish name is Hanukkah. Its date is the 25th of the Jewish month called

Chislew. Chislew corresponds with the English month of December. And therefore, this festival falls very near our Christmas celebration.

A word about the origin of the Festival. From 175 to 164 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes ruled as the King of neighboring Syria. History tells us that he was obsessed by all things Greek. And so, he decided that he would eliminate the Jewish religion once and for all, and in so doing would introduce Greek ways and Greek thoughts, Greek religion and Greek gods into Israel. At first, the change was peaceful. But then the Jewish people began to resist the change. To enforce his rule the Syrian ruler Epiphanes attacked Jerusalem in 170 B.C. The result of the war was devastating to the Jews: 80,000 Jews were killed; an equal number sold into slavery; the Temple treasury was stolen; it became a capital offense to possess a copy of the law, and even the great altar of the burnt offering was turned into an altar to the Olympian Zeus.

In response to this massacre, Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers banded together and began their heroic fight for freedom. They felt called to deliver their country from the savagery that had taken place. In 164 B.C., they succeeded in overthrowing the rule of the Syrian ruler Epiphanes. And in that year, the temple was cleansed, purified and the altar was rebuilt. And to celebrate the purification of the Temple the Jews instituted an eight-day event called the Feast of the Dedication. Inside the temple, large candles were set in rows of eight, and each day during the Festival of Lights, another candle was lit until the eighth day when the temple was flooded with light.

We have now learned that the opening sentence was important for we have learned two things. First, the Jews had recently endured an attempt to eliminate their religion and replace it with a Greek religion. And secondly, as a part of their celebration of liberation, of freedom, light had become a meaningful symbol to them.

And now, within the living memory of those events, Jesus comes into their midst and says that He is the light of the World and that He is the son of God. Now even if these learned Jews had not personally heard Jesus utter these words they had certainly heard from others the claim made by him. All of a sudden the phrase, "light of the world" carries a lot of emotional baggage. For they had recently known darkness and now the symbol of light had great meaning for them. Furthermore, to hear claims that Jesus was the Son of God, to hear the claim that he was divine, these were claims which would have to be challenged...in a court of religious law...and our text today is the beginning of the religious inquiry into the identity of Jesus.

So it is in response to this kind of suspense, to this kind of threat to the very heart of Judaism that we hear the plea: "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." And so Jesus responds, "I have told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." Now that is not the response they wanted to hear. Yes or no was their choice.

But for Jesus to answer yes or no would be confusing to the Jews. If he said yes to being the Messiah then they would have thought he would be like Judas Maccabees and become a military leader; if he said yes, he is God, then he would be compared to

Antiochus Epiphanes. And the Jews bitterly remembered Antiochus imposing new forms of worship on them, which included veneration of himself as a god in Jerusalem's temple. And so Jesus deflects the question about him being the Messiah back to them by saying he had told them, and they did not believe.

Perhaps the scene is not unlike what is happening in our time. The identity of Jesus is still not clear to many people, even those who know the story. There are people who come to church on Easter morning, hear the story, and walk away struggling to digest the amazing story. In an age in which scientific proof is required before belief, some find the story of God touching human hearts to be a stretch. To many the question of identity is still an old question, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And so, for many the search goes on.

But back to the gospel story. Just how were the Jews to know just who He was? Was their question unfair? No, it was a fair question. However, they didn't understand the nature of this new kingdom: a kingdom in which actions would point to the Godly one.

And to think, we thought we could know him by simply memorizing Bible verses in Sunday school and by completing confirmation classes. Obviously, that's a good start. But we need to understand that to be a follower of Jesus will move one from knowing about him to acting in His name. In fact, that's the answer he gave to the Jews who were questioning him..."The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me."

On Friday, I officiated at the memorial service for Ruth Hine. Ruth was a zoologist. She was a naturalist. She was a Christian...a follower of Jesus. For her there was no disconnect between being a scientist and being a Christian. Because for her there was an inner connectedness of all of life. And Ruth realized that we have been given the responsibility to care for this wonderful creation. Throughout her life, she didn't just admire creation; she took seriously the mandate to care for the earth.

In a recent Capital Times column, Ruth was quoted as saying, "As a Christian, I look upon the world as a magnificent, living organism created by God and sustained by God. Human beings are part of that creation, part of nature, if you will. I think it's very important for human beings to realize that we're part of the earth. We forget that sometimes. We set ourselves up above everything else, but we're just a part of the earth."

And just as we have come to understand the connectedness of all creation so also we have come to learn that Jesus links us to one another as human beings. Jesus has helped us move from blood lines to faith lines. And even if we at times would like to walk alone with Jesus, he will take our hand and place it in another. And in so doing, we enlarge our circle of believers...and we gain even greater insights into the wonder of life in this new kingdom. This past week my wife Ruth and I experienced that connectedness as we received e mails from our friends in Poland saddened by the death of their president and then later by the accidental death of our Lutheran Bishop in Poland, and so we, by being connected through our faith, mourn with them.

Just as those first century Jews were told that the true identity of Jesus could be found in the midst of the work that Jesus did in God's name, so also today we continue to find the true meaning and message of Jesus most clearly in similar kinds of acts...a cup of water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, comfort for the ill, presence for the lonely. And also we need to recognize that God's work occurs as a zoologist fights to save frogs from extinction, as researchers strive to find cures for cancer and other diseases, and as we reach out in love to those around the world. Once we have discovered the true identity of Jesus we know that

God so loved the world, that He gave His Son to save it and us. The earth is our gift every day, not just on Earth Day.

Unlike the TSA people at airports who want to check one's identity so bad things don't happen, we want to expose Jesus's identity so good things can happen. That's why we celebrate Easter. We want to share the hope and joy in resurrection. We want to shout out that newness of life is possible. The good news we share is that Jesus has claimed us. We don't have to buy stock in Jesus to secure our future. Rather Jesus gives us gifts of great value to be shared freely: gifts of love, forgiveness, compassion, caring, community. His identity becomes our identity. We are freed up to be graceful people in this world, here and now!

Who is He? As we read the whole gospel of John we begin to get a number of clues as to the real identity of Jesus. And these are the clues which can help us to sharpen our vision. I'd like to close by sharing three identity clues with you.

The first clue is one which we hold up and celebrate at Christmas. Reading from the first chapter of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Again in our text this morning we hear these words: "The Father and I are One." What we discover in John is that Jesus was and is a part of the creative process within this world. Through the words and deeds of Jesus we are again reminded of the scope of God's concern for us: God's concern for us encompasses all of life, alpha, omega, beginning, end. Just as the resurrection was one of God's great creative acts so also we are given power in Jesus's name to continue to be a part of the creative process of new life and resurrection in this world in this time.

The second statement the gospel writer makes is that Jesus was a historical person. The stories of the other gospel writers are enriched by John's gospel. John simply adds to the body of knowledge we have about Jesus.

The last clue John provides about Jesus is the one which stands out in our text today and is one which is still relevant to us today. Listen again to the words: "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me." And now, in the light of Easter, we know that the presence and spirit of Jesus is alive if communities of faith today...in the works we do in His name.

Now those are three good clues to the identity of Jesus...in the beginning, in this world 2000 years ago, in this world now...hidden beneath forms of bread and wine, in the Water and the Word.

Are there still questions as to His identity? Yes, for with Jesus there will always be mystery, there will be hiddenness, there will be surprise. And yet, much like those early Jews, there is still an urgency to know, to inquire, to search for meaning in life.

The next time you fly think about your identity. The TSA may declare you a safe person for flying on an airplane but they may never fully discover who you really are. For your identity goes far beyond a picture, an address, and a lack of red flags. For in baptism you have a new identity which can't be captured by scanners, by pat downs, or by searches. For your identity is one of spirit. God's spirit, which gives direction to all you do and say. It is an amazing identity, one which opens up new life...both here and hereafter. May you celebrate the identity you have in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen Amen. © 2010