

## They Follow Me

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”** Here ends our text.

Tell me, why do you follow Jesus?

In our Gospel text today, there were some Jews following Jesus. But for what reason? It was winter during the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was Hanukkah. Perhaps you’ve been in a store, shopping for Christmas cards. You noticed cards nearby that didn’t say “Merry Christmas,” but “Happy Hanukkah,” and you’ve always wondered what that Jewish holiday was all about. It really began about 200 years before Jesus’ ministry. At that time the ruling King of Syria tried to eliminate the Jewish religion and introduce the Greek gods and religion. It was a capital offence to possess the Scriptures or circumcise a child. The Temple chambers were turned into brothels, and the Temple altar was used to offer swine’s flesh to Zeus. But the Jews revolted. Judah Maccabaeus, meaning Judah “the Hammer,” led the Jews in a bloody war which overthrew Syrian control. The Temple was purified and rededicated. This victory was celebrated every year as the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah. It was kind of like our celebration of Independence Day after the Revolutionary War. And so, Jesus was walking in the Temple during Hanukkah with some Jews following him.

But they weren’t exactly following him. Some of them actually got out in front of Jesus and brought him to a halt. They circled around him like gang members surround a bewildered student on his walk home from school. They had a question, and they weren’t going to let Jesus pass until he answered it. They demanded, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” But why did they want to know? So they could bow down in worship and cry “Hosanna to the Son of David?” No, not really. If these Jews were among the zealots, they were hoping Jesus the Christ would also be Jesus the Hammer. “After 200 years, we need another Boston Tea Party. Throw off this oppressive Roman government like the Maccabees threw off the Syrians. Rid this Roman occupancy of our holy city. Are you with us, or do you need some persuasion?” But if these Jews were among the ruling religious leaders, they wanted to know whether Jesus was the Christ, not so they could follow him, but so they could incriminate him. They were Roman sympathizers and wanted to ensure their own positions. A clear statement from Jesus that he was the Jewish Messiah would arouse Rome’s suspicions. Possibly get him arrested for treason. They fidgeted with the stones held behind their backs. Either way, zealot or religious crony, they weren’t really interested in *following* Jesus, but either pushing him or subduing him.

And some people are like this today. They’re not really interested in following Jesus, but getting in front of him, halting him, bending him to do their wishes. Be a political Savior. Punish other people’s immorality. Or they only follow Jesus within a stone’s throw. Learn enough about him so they can criticize him and debunk him. Get Jesus out of the way so they can keep the status quo of their own life.

But in response to the Jews’ question whether he was the Christ, Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe.” Now when did Jesus tell them he was the Christ? It seemed Jesus always tried to avoid that title. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus said to his disciples, “Shsss. Don’t tell anyone that I’m the Christ.” But this was because that politically charged word “Christ” was often associated with “the Hammer” and revolution. But Jesus told the Jews that he was the Christ in other ways. He told them that he had come down from heaven, that he existed before their father Abraham. And if these words weren’t enough, Jesus added, “The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me.” Actions speak louder than words. These Jews should have believed that Jesus was the Christ because of the miracles he did. He cared for his people by healing their diseases, casting out demons, and raising the dead. And with these works Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies of the Christ. But still these Jews don’t believe.

And then Jesus tells them why they don’t believe. He says, “You do not believe because you are not part of my flock.” Now at first this statement sounds a little backwards to us. From a human perspective we’re used to thinking that people are not part of the flock because they don’t believe. But we are part of the flock because we do believe. That’s how we define the Christian church, all believers in Christ. If you believe, you’re in. If you don’t believe, you’re out. But from God’s perspective, Jesus says it the opposite way. “You do not believe because you’re not part of my flock. You do believe because you are part of my flock.” Being

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part of his flock or not determines belief or unbelief. Being part of his flock comes before belief. But how can this be? Let me attempt to explain.

Years ago, our family had the privilege of dog-sitting for another family's dog. It was a six-month-old beagle pup. The other family loved it and enjoyed it. But for us, it became an unwelcome stranger. It barked incessantly, chewed on our shoes, and defecated on the kitchen floor. And whenever we tried to quiet it or discipline it, it paid no attention. It didn't know our voices or understand our commands. The only thing that kept it from running off was by keeping it in its pen or taking it out on a leash. And even on the leash, it was either out in front pulling us along or lagging so far behind that we had to drag it. The dog didn't respond to our command to heel. It didn't follow us because it wasn't our dog.

When I was eight years old, my father took me to a kennel. And there from a litter of beagle pups we chose one dog. It was my father's gift to me. We took him home, and I cared for him. Petted him and brushed him, bathed him and played with him, fed him and put straw in his kennel. Sometimes he ran off, and I had to chase after him and bring him home. I talked to him and called him by name. Sometimes I disciplined him, but I loved that dog. One time he got into a fight with the neighbor's German Shepherd and began to yelp, but I ran in and scooped him up. I got a few teeth marks in my arm. The other dog jumped up trying to snatch at my dog, but I kicked it away. I protected my dog and washed his wounds. And everywhere I went, my dog followed me. No leash needed. He was always around me. Whenever I called, he came. He followed me because he was my dog.

Well, you aren't Jesus' dog, but you are his sheep. Before you were born, even before the foundation of the world, God knew you and chose you. You were the Father's love gift to His Son. He created you and formed you in the womb. He provided for all your needs, food, clothing, and shelter. In your sin you ran off. But God chased after you. In Holy Baptism he called you by name. He talked to you in his Word. He brought you home to himself. Sometimes he disciplines you, but only because he loves you. When that wolf, the devil, tore into you with his jaws of death, Jesus scooped you up. On the cross he felt the bite of the nails in his hands and feet, but you were safe in his arms. The devil tried to snatch you out of his hands, but Jesus kicked him away. He protects you and washes your wounds. And so wherever Jesus goes, you follow him. No leash of the Law needed. You hang around him in church, and Bible study, and wherever he's present in his Word. You follow Jesus because you are his sheep. You believe in Him because you are part of his flock.

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." Because God chose you, because you are his sheep, you have eternal life and will never perish. No one can snatch you out of Jesus' hand or the Father's hand. But it's not two hands. It's one hand. For Jesus said, "I and the Father are one." He doesn't say, "I am the Father or the Father is me," one person, but "I and the Father are one." Two distinct persons in one divine essence. He alludes to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one divine being.

This last statement of Jesus, "I and the Father are one," is his strongest answer yet that He is the Christ. Not just, "I came down from heaven," or "I existed before Abraham," like an angelic being could claim, but "I am God." The Jews who surrounded Jesus can't believe this because they aren't part of his flock. This isn't Jesus the Christ or Jesus the Hammer. This is Jesus the nut or Jesus the blasphemer. They finally reveal their real reason for following Jesus. They bend down to pick up stones to stone him. They don't believe in him because they aren't his sheep.

This morning we have a feast of dedication. Not a feast instituted by man, like Hanukkah, but a feast instituted by our Lord, His Supper. For the Father has set apart his Son, dedicated him to be the new Temple. And we aren't drug to this altar by the leash of the Law with stones in our hands. We hear his voice and follow our shepherd to the table he has prepared for us. We bend down with our hands open. We receive Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. We believe his Words that he gives us eternal life, that we will never perish, and no one can snatch us out of his hand. We believe because we are part of his flock. Why do you follow Jesus? You follow him because you are his sheep. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.