

May 12, 2019 – Good Shepherd Sunday, Mother’s Day
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 10:22-30, Acts 9: 36-43

Hats Off to Tabitha

Some of you wore hats to church today. Historically and culturally wearing a hat to church can be a sign of respect, and they can be stylish, too, and so a member suggested that this could be a fun way to mark Mother’s Day. In honor of women, some women are wearing headwear today, and some men, too. As it happens, one of today’s readings mentions a woman and personal attire. In the reading from Acts, a woman named Tabitha (or in Greek, Dorcas), is remembered for her apparel, for the tunics and other clothing that she made. Hats aren’t specified. Still, the Bible has relatively little to say about fashion, (except maybe Leviticus, which does talk a lot about priestly garb....) so it seemed an interesting coincidence to me.

Today is also Good Shepherd Sunday. That’s how the fourth Sunday of the Easter season is known, according to the church calendar. This means that even more than clothing, today’s scriptures include animals who help us make clothing, sheep. Would have been a good Sunday to wear wool. For the gospel reading, we have John ten, the chapter known as the “Good Shepherd Discourse.” We hear only the very end of it this Good Shepherd Sunday, dropping into the discourse just as Jesus is wrapping it up. He has already announced that he is the Good Shepherd and has said quite a bit about what that means, what he does. For the audience to whom Jesus is speaking this imagery is not just a hint, it’s a flashing neon sign. For the people to whom Jesus is speaking, shepherd language has all kinds of historical, cultural, scriptural and religious resonances. It calls to mind the great and beloved king, David, and prophetic words of Isaiah, including a passage modern ears might know musically. Handel set it to music in *Messiah*, this prophecy from Isaiah, “He shall lead his flock like a shepherd.”

That Jesus uses this ancient, Old Testament imagery about himself is, to put it lightly, telling. So it is understandable that he sounds a little annoyed with the question posed to him at the end of the Good Shepherd Discourse. I think you can hear Jesus annoyance, I think you can practically hear him sigh in exasperation, when some religious authorities say to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us.” That’s like saying to Marie Kondo, “If you can organize a closet, tell us.” That’s like saying to LeBron James, “If you are a good basketball player, tell us.” That’s like saying to Cookie Monster, “If you like cookies, tell us.” Jesus Christ it’s in his name! The word Christ means “Messiah, Anointed One.” “If you are the Messiah, tell us.” “That’s what I’ve been doing!” Jesus says, “and you do not believe me!”

This is telling. It tells us that even the most compelling words in the world will not convince someone to believe that Jesus is Lord. It’s not enough, not even the most unquestionable presentation, not even when spoken by Jesus Christ himself. You cannot argue someone into faith. So much for preaching.

Exasperated though he may be, Jesus does not stop talking, does not stop engaging with people who don’t get it. The image of the Good Shepherd is not just a metaphor that has inspired countless musical works of art. What the Good Shepherd says here about belief begs for our attention for a better understanding of what it means to believe. Perhaps, if we understand that better, we might help others understand it, too. Jesus’ definition of belief is bigger, fuller, asks and expects more. “You don’t believe,” Jesus says, “because you don’t belong to my sheep. My

sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.” That is, belief has more to it than mental assent. Belief, or perhaps even better, being a believer, is not merely cognitive. It includes that, yes, Christian faith is not mindless. Christian belief includes certain understandings, principles one holds, stories one knows, affirmations one makes. These are part of what it means to believe as a Christian.

But so is the company one keeps. Christian belief distinguishes itself from being simply a possible worldview—a thoughtful, and historical worldview—Christian belief distinguishes itself from being simply that by including the crucial element of relationship, belonging. Christian belief includes being in relationship—and what those relationships are like, their character and quality. Christian belief includes a commitment, which is not just verbal, to being in community with other people, to being connected to others in caring ways. Jesus says, “You don’t believe because you don’t belong...” It takes more than knowing to be a believer, it takes being with others, other sheep, as difficult and foolish as they are, as sheepish as we all are...

And it takes yet more than that, as Jesus also goes on to say. In addition to belonging, Christian belief also includes what one does, the kinds of things one chooses to do with one’s time, and energy, and resources, how one behaves. Jesus says that the ones who belong, who know his voice, follow him. They act in a certain way. They do what he does, because what you do reflects what you believe.

Believing is belonging and behaving. It’s not just the one, it’s the other, too, and also the third. Three parts to the chord. It’s almost Trinitarian. Christians like threes. Believing is head, and heart, and hands. Believing is understanding, and relationship, and action.

We have all been jarred by expressions of belief that lack one of these. We all know how discordant it is, when one aspect is absent. We’ve all experienced how exasperating it is, how appalling, the hypocrisy of a believer who is missing one of those necessary elements. The person who knows so much, but loves so little. The person who talks a good game, but actually does nothing. The person who is content to stay in a sentimental bubble, blind to what is happening beyond their own cozy circle. The person who is so on fire with righteous action they scorch anyone or anything in their path, people and common sense alike. We have all seen any number of people doing all of these things. We have all been all of these people. At least, I have. That is not what it means to be a believer, Jesus tells us, in today’s gospel.

We can also see what living like a believer is like, in today’s reading from Acts—Acts being the Biblical book that chronicles the life of the first believers. We can see it in the story of the disciple named Tabitha. On a day we think about women it’s worth pointing out that the Bible uses that word to describe her, disciple, *mathete* in its feminine form. Tabitha was a disciple, a believer, who behaved in a certain way: she was devoted to good works and acts of charity, and who belonged, was in relationship with others; she was dearly loved, deeply mourned. When she died, her friends gathered together to weep, and as did they showed everyone all the clothing Tabitha had made. We still do this today, as we mourn, we hold on to, point out, beloved garments. My mother has a drawer full of things from her sister, who was my godmother, a drawer full of her many stylish hats. In the book of Acts, the disciple named Peter comes to be with the community that mourns, and then he does what he has seen Jesus do. This story in Acts closely follows one from the gospels. Peter says words that echo what Jesus said to Jairus’s daughter, Jesus said to that young woman, “Talitha cum,” Peter says, “Tabitha, cum.”

The disciple named Tabitha, that believer, had yet more life to live, yet more belonging, yet more behaving, yet more living as one of Jesus’ own. As do we.