

Sermon Text: John 10:22-33

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I do try usually to begin with some bit of humor or levity, and I don't have any today. It is a serious sermon, and I hope one that you will ponder deeply because it speaks to the essence of our faith and who Jesus is.

The first magazine article, years ago, TV journalist Ted Koppel made some negative comments about modern day heroes. He said we are creating a lot of false idols in this society. He said it troubled him about our society. There have been cultures, and perhaps there still are somewhere in the world, in which philosophers and poets and teachers are the stars of the civilization. Then he concludes, but look at who the stars of our civilization are!

I think back just a few weeks. Until voices united and rose up and said no, TV almost made a sort of a star out of the mad man who killed 32 random students at Virginia Tech. He was becoming a star.

One of the most popular TV shows today take unknowns and give them a chance to become the next American idol! From nothing and often for nothing noteworthy, we create idols and we look up to them until they fall or fall out of fashion.

Another thing you may have seen recently on TV and I read about in the Biblical Archeological Review, the earliest Christian church has been found in Jerusalem, not spread far a field, but in Jerusalem. Contrary to some recent fiction, it confirms that before Constantine, before counsels and controversies had opportunity to change the earliest teachings, the church taught what it has always taught from the beginning about Jesus. When you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. The Father and Jesus are one. That is what is says in this earliest church in the mosaic floor from the late second or early third century. It says plainly, Jesus Christ is God! As strange as it seems, as strange as it sounds, we have taught that and fleshed that out, to make a pun, and it almost got Jesus stoned to death in today's passage.

That early church was found on prison ground as they dug to expand, and you may remember if you read the story or saw it on TV, where the church was, some people find it ominous. It was in Megiddo, from which we get Armageddon. It says in the mosaic, written in stone, dedicated to the God, Jesus Christ. It is what the church has always taught, but when Jesus said, “The Father and I are one,” Jesus was violating the strictest of teachings in all of Judaism. The Shema is taught as the very first theological statement to all Jews everywhere. It is Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. In South Carolina that translates, “Listen up, Israel, the God we know is God, and God is one, and there ain't no others!” That's a loose translation.

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The reason the Shema is taught first and said often is that having another god or even believing in the possibility of any god beside the one God was idolatry and falling away from Jewish faith. They thought Jesus blasphemed. They thought He, a mere man, was making Himself God, and for such an absolute offense, He should die. Idolatry and blasphemy they cried! We think we think very highly of the nature and character and teaching of Jesus, but does something honestly well up with a sort of an offense within us when we hear Him say the Father and I are one or a sort of a dissonance or a sort of a question? Or when He says to Philip in John 14, when Philip says, “Jesus show us the Father,” and Jesus, I imagine, shaking His head, says, “Philip have I been with you all this time and you still do not know Me? Whoever has seen Me, has seen the Father. How can you say show us the Father?”

I want you to forgive a true observation, though not politically correct to say, but it helps us understand where we are. Islam coming centuries after Christianity and millennia after Judaism is a faith that plays off both Judaism and Christianity in many ways. One way is strict monotheism, but even more volatile in defending it. The Koran states that Christians do not worship one God. It mistakenly relates that Jesus taught to worship God, Himself, and to worship His mother, Mary. That’s not right. The roots of the reasons for the rocks being picked up in this passage still play out as a reason that Christians are looked upon suspiciously by Islam and by Judaism because we speak of a trium God, Father, Son and Spirit, and when we speak thusly, we confuse not only outsiders, but some in the pews as well. Some folks say we should think and let think on this issue. I am not sure that we can do that. I am not sure that we can do that within the church.

The church has spoken on this matter of faith, and it is crucially important to grasp, if not understand, and I don’t pretend to completely understand, but I do think it’s okay for God to be bigger than my brain. That’s okay. I’m not sure that we are free to pick and choose about Jesus being God in flesh. That is what we sing about and celebrate at Christmas. The incarnation is merely another word for God coming to us in flesh, first as a babe in a feeding trough in a barn in Bethlehem of all places.

We hear that theologically spelled out in the beginning of the Gospel of John where it says, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and that word which was God became flesh and dwelt among us.” I will grant you that when you lay it out so plainly, I can see how others cannot see that we do indeed believe in one creator God manifest as Father and Son and Spirit.

I want to quote from C. S. Lewis. It’s a long quote, but he is more brilliant than I will ever be, and hear how he puts it. Lewis writes, “Considering Jesus, there is no halfway house, and there is no parallel to other religions. If you go to Buddha and ask him, “Are you some sort of Brahma”, he will say, “My son you are still in the veil of illusion.” If you go to Socrates, and ask, “Are you Zeus”, he will laugh at you. If you go to Mohammed and ask, “Are you Allah”, he would first rent his clothing, then cut off your head.” Lewis continues, “The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out

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of the question. The only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion, which undermines the whole mind of man.” Lewis continues, “He was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people, who actually met Him. He produced mainly three effects: hatred, terror, or adoration. There is no trace of people expressing mild approval.” Now this part’s me, “It worries me a little that we in the church, we in the modern-day church, tend to express mild approval for Jesus. Maybe we have not thought deeply enough about what we say and what we sing and proclaim. Mild approval is not appropriate for the creator God coming in flesh and dying for our sins. That is an under reaction, and even that is an understatement.” Again from Lewis, if you will indulge me, “Jesus told people that their sins were forgiven. This makes sense only if He really was the God, whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. Saying that He’s a great moral teacher is the one thing we must never say. A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else the devil. Now, you can shut Him up for a fool or you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Salvation history is clear about two things. Number one, humans all without exception are naturally self-centered and not God-centered as we were meant to be, and we’re not especially other people-centered either as we were meant to be, and so there are lies and there are betrayals and there are wars, etc., in every epic of history all over the face of this earth. We are sinners – not what God intended. As sinners, we cannot save ourselves from the judgment of sin or the fact of death. Number two, it descends from the first point, only God can save us from ourselves and from our selfishness, and this is important, only God can restore us to our right minds and to the love and the righteousness we were made for and open our eyes so we can see and value and love our forgiven selves and even love our sinner neighbors. If all that is true, and I can say history and politics and treaties and me bear out that the sin part is true, if all that is true, then only God can change the situation and only God can change me. So it becomes very important to our faith to understand who God is.

As the mosaic in the floor at Megiddo said, “Dedicated to the God, Jesus Christ.”

Christians are those dedicated to the same God, the one made known in Jesus Christ, the one who came to us, loved us and loved our enemies as well. Do not dare leave, do not dare leave out the second part, loved our enemies as well. If we do, then we make Jesus into some strange sort of idol. He is not our Jesus. He is the world’s Jesus, the world’s God, the one who is, and as Savior, the offer is for whomsoever will come, and the atonement was offered to all.

First John, second chapter says, “And He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” We want to make Jesus our own little God, but Jesus is the one big God. Remember, God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, and it’s not our jobs to echo any condemnation. That’s not what

Jesus came for, and that's not our job. Jesus came not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

Yes, faith is necessary. The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice it says in today's lesson. This directly parallels the relationship between Jesus and His Father. Jesus is both God and man, and He is one with the Father, and the members of His flock are one with Him. He's in intimate union with the Father, and the members of His flock are supposed to be in intimate union with Him. He was raised from His crucifixion death by the Father, and we will be raised as His flock to life eternal.

Of course, faith is necessary, and faith is about relationship and growth and doing God's will, and that means change. It means change because without faith, we do not do God's will, and we really don't want to. After faith, we will still sin, but we will grow through the influence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Over time, we grow ever closer to the life that Jesus lived understanding how much God loves sinners, loves me as a sinner, and loves you as a sinner and even those so and sos over there that we don't like to associate with. You are God's concern. Jesus proves it. Your enemy is also God's concern. Jesus proves it.

We may not trust other people. We may not like other people. We may even sometimes have to defend ourselves against other people. There are no other people who are not offered love, forgiveness and grace by God in Christ. We may not hate anyone at anytime for any reason and call ourselves a follower of Jesus Christ. That is very clear. Jesus, who did not even hate, but prayed for those who nailed Him to a cross. Jesus did not come to judge. Judgment was already on our heads, so to speak. Sin and death were already reigning in the world when He came and still echoed down through the centuries and through our lives.

The final victory belongs to the only one who could win for us. The final victory belongs to God, to God in Christ.

Now my closing illustration is going to date me horribly. It's about comedian Red Skelton, and I can only imagine that the young people here are going to be thinking of Halloween and some sort of a red costume with a skeleton. I don't know what they're thinking of. Red Skelton was a good comedian years ago, and those of you what, 30 and under, just take my word for it. He once was directed to an airport celebrity lounge as he waited between flights. Photographers and reporters grouped around him, snapping pictures and asking questions, and Skelton told the reporters he was on his way to speak to a college audience on the topic of religion, then he said, during a recent question and answer session, a student asked me, “Why can't I find God?” Red Skelton told him that you can't find God for the same reason a thief can't find a policeman. You're not looking for Him. I then suggested that the student, every morning, should do this. This sounds trite, but it's not bad. He said to write the word 'good' on a blackboard or a piece of paper in your room every morning, then go out and do something for someone expecting nothing in return because that is what the love of God is like. It will help you

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understand who God is. Expect nothing in return, and nothing is zero I told him, so you go home and you scratch an O out of the word good and you’ll find God. As he was leaving, the man he talked to and told the story shook his hand and said, “Have a good morning, sir.” Skelton glanced at his watch and said, “Well, it’s almost noon,” and so it is, and replied, “It’s too late for a good morning. Have a good life.”

It is important to know what a good thing God has done for us in Jesus Christ, what a huge thing God has done for us, the creator God coming in flesh. That when we understand it or even begin to comprehend the miniscule part of the truth of it that becomes the catalyst for our doing what little we can in His name. God’s light, it says in the Gospel of John, came into the darkness and this world could not comprehend it and could not put it out. We as Christians are the afterglow of that great event, empowered by God’s spirit, always, always, pictured in classical art, God’s spirit by light and the flames at Pentecost. We are the afterglow of the light of God coming into our darkness in Jesus Christ.

Remember who Jesus is. Remember who you are. Act accordingly. Amen.