

Betsy Moe
Sermon 7.26.09
"Exclusively Yours"

John 10:11-16

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Last week, I talked about the nature of heaven – what we know and what we don't know about our final destination. I talked about heaven not as a place "somewhere out there," but as a fully redeemed relationship with God. But I suspect that even more pressing than the need to know what heaven is like is the question of who is in and who is out in that eternal relationship with God. Here are today's questions: *Jesus said, "I am the way...." How exclusive is heaven? Will only Christians be there? Will all the people who never had a chance to hear about Jesus go to hell?*

John 14:1-11

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

4 And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." 8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not ask on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Anyone who has applied recently to college or to graduate school or has a child who has applied recently to college or to graduate school knows how competitive it can be. I cannot imagine how difficult it would be to be in charge of admission to a college these days, determining which students are in and which students are out. At the same time that more and more students are desiring an advanced education, colleges are facing crippling budget constraints, so the stakes seem to be even higher than normal. At least colleges have admissions *committees*, so that there are varying perspectives and so that there is not one person "to blame" if a student is not admitted. In the end, these committees have to decide who will fit the best in their limited programs – based on somewhat limited information about each student: past performance, test scores, writing ability, the experiences and background one can list on a short application. Eric and I have had several friends in the past ten years who have applied to graduate programs. One friend we know is a shining star in his field: intelligent, innovative, articulate, a joy to be around – and he was turned away by three different schools. We try to give these committees the benefit of the doubt and figure that it just must have been torturous to have to say no to him. What a burden it would be to have to determine who is in, who is out in a college – to decide a person's future, in a way.

But serving on a college admissions committee doesn't sound so bad when you compare it with determining who is in and who is out in the kingdom of God. How would God make these kinds of decisions? How does God decide about Uncle Hal, who had a negative experience of church as a boy, who seems to worship nature while fishing all his life? What about your co-worker Prasan who practices Hinduism, whose ancestors practiced Hinduism? What about cousin Shirley who converted to Judaism when she got married? What about your son, Jim, who was baptized in the Presbyterian Church, but now bar-hops on Saturday nights and wouldn't dream of getting up for church? Knowing that God is fair, you think that God would have to consider things like, "Has this man had a fair chance to hear about Jesus Christ?" "What kinds of disadvantages or roadblocks to the gospel did this woman run into while going about the business of life?"

What are we, as Christians, as Presbyterians, to think and do in a world of religious differences? Are we to be anxious about people we know who have no apparent relationship with Jesus Christ? Should we be worried that they could be on a path to eternal destruction? Would we somehow be responsible if they were and we hadn't said anything, or is salvation purely God's business? *How exclusive is heaven? Will only Christians be there? Who's in, who's out, and is it even our business?*

In *The Last Battle* -- the last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis -- the children all find themselves in a "new Narnia" that is supposed to be like the "new heavens and new earth" that we Christians hope for in the end. The surprising thing is that with them in the new Narnia is a foreigner -- a "Calormene," who had not put his faith in Aslan (the Christ figure) during his life. Aslan simply welcomes him because of his devotion to the god he worshipped. Some readers are upset by this; Lewis seems to make the claim that anyone who shows a little devotion in this life deserves to live with God eternally. It is like saying that someone who worshipped nature may have been misguided but should be accepted by God because they "meant well." I can see why there is controversy around this part of the book. But I appreciate that Lewis struggled with the question of outsiders being included in the kingdom of God and acknowledged that we may not know all the information we need to know to pass judgment.

Our scripture passage from John 14 is one of those passages that has been viewed as a litmus test of "who's in, who's out" by many Christians, as well as by people outside the Christian faith looking in. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also." These verses reflect the conviction at the heart of John's gospel: that if you want to know God, if you want to have a clear sense of the qualities of God, look at Jesus -- God in human form. The logical conclusion, it seems, is that those who know Jesus are in, those who do not are out.

Yet -- just four chapters earlier, Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd who has "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" whom he will bring along and who will listen to his voice (10:16). Scholars have debated the meaning of this verse; some think Jesus was saying, essentially, "I have other sheep that are not Jewish," "I'm going to take care of and include even gentiles." Others believe Jesus was making clear God's utter freedom to include in the end people of other faiths, other ideologies. In their minds, Jesus was reserving the right to include anyone he wanted to. But whether the "sheep that do not belong to this fold" are gentiles who end up professing faith in Christ or gentiles who practice other faiths altogether, the matter of who is in and who is out seems to be solely in the Shepherd's hands.

When we take a step back and look at the larger picture of the Old and New Testament witnesses, we see that there is always a tension between exclusivity and inclusivity, between decisive expectations of what the people of God should believe and how they should act and the sometimes baffling freedom of God to include whomever God wants. God chooses one nation, Israel, and sets up very clear boundaries against outsiders, warning against the dangers of intermarriage; yet, three foreign outsiders -- Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth -- wind up

being shining examples of faith who make it into Jesus' genealogy. Then there are the outsiders whom Jesus meets and accepts along the way – namely, the thief on the cross who lives his life as a criminal, says a few nice words in defense of Jesus before he dies and gets the promise of paradise.

The God we encounter in scripture is clear about expectations of those who believe, but at the same time full of surprises. (Calormenes in Narnia are not beyond the realm of possibility!) In trying to answer the question of who is in and who is out, and is it our business, we have to at least acknowledge this tension: we are bound into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ – but who knows how inclusive God's reach will be in the end?

A helpful statement was put together by a committee of our denomination in 2003 called "Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ." I want to read a snippet of it for you because I find it to be so well-stated:

"Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him....No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of 'God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' [1 Tim. 2:4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine."¹

Some of you may find this statement refreshing; others of you may be thinking, "Boy, Presbyterians are sure wishy-washy. Which is it? Are you saved by faith in Christ or by an arbitrary decision of God?"

I want to say this clearly: we are saved by Christ alone who died to forgive sin. We have no reason to think that God may just start including people based on their kindness and devotion. People are included because Jesus died for them on the cross; it's just that the reach of the cross may be wider than we could imagine.

You see, it's the cross that is the wild card here. That cross event, at which Jesus said, "It is finished." That cross event, which put an end to the power of sin and death, which transformed the world in ways we cannot begin to grasp. At that cross event, outsiders – sinners -- were welcomed in with open arms. No one did anything to deserve this; forgiving sin was pure grace on God's part. In the end,

¹ "Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ," affirmed by the 214th General Assembly of the PC(USA) (2002).
<http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/christology/hopeinthelord.pdf>

it will not be a certain level of devotion that saves a person; it will not be a person's decision to accept Christ; it will not even be a person's baptism that will save her. Anyone who is saved in the end will be saved because Christ died on a cross. Devotion, decisions, baptism – these are our human responses to what Christ has already done for us.

So in considering who is in and who is out, we have no choice but to hold these two truths in balance: that Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord and that God is sovereign and free to save whom God wants to save. But while we are holding both of these, what are we called to do, who are we called to be? Are we simply to stand in this balance and smile politely at Uncle Hal, co-worker Prasan, Aunt Shirley, son Jim? I think Presbyterians are pretty good at smiling politely. It's what we call "evangelism."

In both the Old and New Testaments, the people with faith – the people who were gifted with knowledge of God --were also given the responsibility of living and speaking in a way that would point others to the same knowledge of God. The Israelites who were chosen by God were given laws (like not marrying foreigners, like caring for the poor and oppressed) so that their different way of living and being would be a light and blessing to all nations. The disciples who were witnesses to Jesus saying, "I am the way and the truth and the life," who saw Jesus die on a cross and rise again, were filled with the Holy Spirit and commissioned to continue Jesus' work on earth. Was saving people their responsibility? No – it was and always will be God's business – but by living faithfully, and yes, by bearing witness to their faith in words, God's mission would be carried out.

We would do well to speak with the conviction of John, who believed that Jesus' dwelling with us and then dying for us made access, provided the way to a relationship with God; that Jesus' dwelling with us and then dying for us showed the *truth* about the depth of God's love for us; that Jesus' dwelling with us and then dying for us broke open the possibility of abundant *life* – both here on earth and after we die.

We live in a world where religious pluralism is real. Our claim that Jesus is the fullest picture of God may sound crazy to some, but Christ crucified and risen is the central claim of our faith that we celebrate. We will not know until the end how far-reaching was the power of the cross – but I'm not sure God would want us to carry the burden of that knowledge now. I, personally, am comfortable with God being a one-person admissions committee and that God is not dealing with budget constraints. It is enough for us to know that by grace we have been saved, welcomed in through Jesus Christ – and that our role is to let others know about that wide-open welcome.

