

## Plain Speaking

Isaiah 61:1-3  
John 10:22-30

Harry S. Truman was perhaps the most plain spoken person ever to reach high office in the United States of America. He was fond of saying, “My choice early in life was either to be a piano player in a brothel, or a politician. To tell you the truth, there's hardly a difference between the two.” Harry S. Truman: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1945-53 contains this from Truman: “Once a government is committed to the principle of silencing the voice of opposition, it has only one way to go, and that is down the path of increasingly repressive measures, until it becomes a source of terror to all its citizens and creates a country where everyone lives in fear.” It would seem to this observer, especially considering the events of this week, that this frightening statement *must* be heeded by those on all sides of our current debates. We must speak and listen plainly.

Today we stepped into the middle of a confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. John 10 is a carefully crafted chapter with a theme: Jesus gradually revealing his divine power and authority. But up to this moment, his self-revelation has consisted of signs and implications. Using the extended metaphor of sheep and shepherd, Jesus has *indicated* that he is the Good Shepherd, that he has come to save his sheep, that he actually has sheep “not of this fold” (non-Jews), that the

“hirelings” charged with caring for the sheep do not care. By hirelings he means the Jewish leaders, as they well know.

They have had enough. John tells us, “the Jews gathered round him...” The syntax of the Greek here reads more like, “they hemmed him in”. This episode has a very physical side to it. Having surrounded Jesus, they demand, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

“I *have* told you,” Jesus replies, “and you do not believe.” He goes on to cite the “works I do in my Father’s name”. The Jews believed in the power of a name. We have often noted they would not speak the name of God out loud, nor even print it, because to do so would be to claim intimacy with, and influence over, God. Jesus has performed miracles and preached with authority never before seen. He has been letting these works speak for him; they “bear witness” to his power. But the Jews cannot believe because, “you do not belong to my sheep.” This is a blatant shot across the bow. The Jews’ entire identity lies in their status as the Chosen People, the tribes with whom Yahweh has made covenants. They see themselves as the sheepest of all the sheep.

Yet now this Jesus person has the audacity to label them “not my sheep”. And he doubles down, saying, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; *and I give them eternal life...and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.*” Who but God can give eternal life? Though Jesus still does not come right out and say,

“Yep! You got me! I **am** the Messiah!” he concludes with a statement that comes as close as possible without actually saying so. He says, “I and the Father are one.” As I understand it, attorneys are trained to prepare for cases by making their opponents' arguments. Let us try to understand the Jews' point of view. They look for the Messiah. They believe when he comes he will free them from foreign oppression. They believe he will appear in the temple in all his glory. Above all, they believe they *are* the Messiah's one and only flock. Virtually everything Jesus has said flies directly in the opposite direction. He is causing them spiritual and existential whiplash.

He has also put the Jews in a tough spot. He has forced them to make a decision about himself. Either he is or is not the Messiah. If he is not how can they account for the signs and the wonders? If he is not they must eliminate him and his charade as quickly as possible. Ah, but what if he *is* the Messiah? That would account for the signs and wonders. If he is they must decide, each individual one of them, whether to follow him. As a matter of fact, Jesus puts us in the same spot. Each one of us must decide whether we believe he is the Messiah. This may seem obvious, but it bears stating: it takes an act of faith to follow Jesus. Near the end of his gospel John wrote, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written ***that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God***, and that believing you may have life in his name. So the question before us today is, do we believe this?

Jesus spoke plainly enough about his identity as God. “I and the Father are

one,” he said. Following him requires that we seek to do justice in his name.

Following him requires that we serve the least of these in his name. Following him requires that we worship him corporately, that we minister to one another, that we give of every talent we have. But first and foremost, following Jesus requires that we believe in him as the Son of God. We can do justice, serve the least and all the rest without such faith. In fact, many admirable people do. But such is not Christianity. It is, rather, an ethical, existential way of life.

The Christian existentialist Soren Kierkegaard wrote, in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, “To dare to have faith is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.” Kierkegaard coined the term “leap of faith”. By it he meant taking that seemingly foolish, yet ultimately and eternally rewarding dare. He meant the only life worth living requires that we trust that God lives, and that in the person of Jesus, God has graciously shown us infinite mercy. Speaking plainly, faith saves. Let every one of us receive the gift of faith in our healing, loving savior, Jesus Christ.