

Spoken For

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

We were visiting in the office the other day about the good old days and how much things have changed since we were young, like way back in the 1960's. It reminded me of a conversation I heard back then. They were just kidding, I'm sure, but at a gathering of fellow students I overheard one student say to another, "Back off, mister. She's already spoken for."

A male student had attempted to engage a young woman in conversation. His buddy wheeled around and claimed her as his girlfriend.

"I didn't know we were boyfriend and girlfriend," said the young woman in amazement. "How sweet."

Now, aside from any of your concerns about the gender dynamics of that exchange, I want you to keep that conversation in mind. "Back off, she's already spoken for," though a bit trivial, isn't it an inappropriate characterization of this Sunday's Gospel. You all here this morning—all of you—are "spoken for." Someone has turned toward you, reached out to you, called you by name, and spoken for you. You are named and claimed by one who does not intend to allow others to name or claim you: Jesus.

You see, the mistake (and maybe as preachers we are partly to blame for that mistake) is thinking that religion is something that you do. That faith is something that you can work up in yourself, as part of your determination to get your head straight and believe the right things in the right way. You mistakenly think that church is where you decide to come as part of a larger strategy for personal development. Church is the place where you gather with others who are striving to be the best they can be. And the sermon? Sermons are where the preacher points out, in as charming and beguiling a way as possible, all the areas where you have been going wrong and what you need

to do to set yourself right. In the sermon, you are given the opportunity to make a midstream correction in your life: “Here are the six steps you need to take next week to have a better week. Let me give you three principles that will enable you to achieve personal happiness.”

Yes, that’s right. I’m saying that way of characterizing the Christian faith is a mistake.

There are two problems with that way of thinking about religion. First, in spite of your good intentions, there are (hard) limits to your power over your thoughts, feelings, and actions. In short, you are human, as am I. As even Saint Paul said, “The good that I would do, I cannot.” There are limits to what you can decide to do and achieve, particularly when it comes to God. Most of the time in our history, when we think we are busy cozying up to God, climbing ever higher toward God, what we have been climbing toward is no more than an idol—our construction of a “god” who is easier to get along with than a true and living God revealed in Jesus.

Second, God is God and we are not. God is holy, whereas we are, well, you know the mess that our sometimes very best intentions make of the world. As the prophets say, God’s thoughts are higher and grander and other than our thoughts. No matter how hard we try, no matter which technique we use, we are incapable of climbing up to God. We are totally dependent on God climbing down to us.

And in Jesus Christ, that’s just what God has done. Jesus speaks of himself as “the good shepherd.” There may be some shepherds who say to themselves, when some dumb sheep wanders away from the safety of the fold, “Aw, let it go. I’ve got plenty of other sheep who stayed right here at home. I can do without one sheep.”

No. The good shepherd, Jesus insists, goes out and beats the bushes and searches for that one wayward sheep until he finds that sheep, and then the good shepherd brings that sheep back safely to the fold.

Maybe you've never done any serious wandering in your life, never spent time in difficult, dark, trackless wilderness. But even if you have never wandered far, all of us are here this morning not on the basis of something we have decided, or because we took a path back to God, but rather because in Jesus Christ, God decided to take a path toward us.

And in this morning's scripture, Jesus says that the same good shepherd—once he has laid hold of his sheep, once he knows his sheep on a first-name basis—will never, ever let his sheep out of his grasp. They will never, ever wander so far that the good shepherd can't find them. Do you need to hear that reassurance from Jesus this morning?

That's why it's a big mistake to think of our faith as a positive personality characteristic of ours. It's a mistake to think of religion as something that you think, feel, or do for God. Our relationship with God is based solely on something that God has thought, felt, and done for us. Here's a lesson that we keep having to learn and relearn. And yet, upon this truth is our greatest reassurance.

Jesus's critics are attacking him from every angle. Well, that's nothing new. And in their attacks, they are surely hoping to dissuade some of Jesus's followers from following him since Jesus has been attracting more disciples—maybe even some of the disciples who had once followed these self-righteous leaders. Jesus's critics are attempting to discredit him, to trip him up in his arguments, and to show that there's no way this homeless, wandering rabbi could be the long--anticipated Messiah. Maybe that's why Jesus responds with strong, reassuring words:

My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them from my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

Let me spin out some implications of this statement by Jesus:

Who is a Christian? Christians are not only those who have heard the voice of Jesus but those whom Jesus knows. Christians follow Jesus on the basis of having heard Jesus's voice calling them. Christians are not first of all those who give to Jesus but those who have received a gift from Jesus: eternal life—life, abundant, overflowing life, not someday in eternity but right here and now.

Once Jesus has claimed us, once we have heard his claim upon our lives, as far as our relationship with Jesus is concerned, “no one will snatch [us] out of [his] hand.” With this wonderfully vivid, strong language, John describes the good shepherd's unending determination to keep what he has been given by the Father. Jesus is here saying that we—you and I, in spite of all of our faults and weaknesses—are the gift of the Father to the Son. And the Son promises never to let go of what the Father has given him.

Charles Lee, a pastor in Alabama, accompanied Jesse Jackson on a goodwill tour of Africa. They were in an African country where huge crowds greeted Jackson when he landed at the airport. He and his entourage headed straight for the American embassy. In the crush of the adoring crowds at the embassy, some of Jackson's group got separated. Among those who were separated out was Charles Lee.

As the group swept through the embassy gates and the guards tried to sort out who was with Jesse's group and who was not, Charles found himself outside as the gates were pushed shut.

“Jesse! Jesse!” Charles shouted. “Hey, Jesse, don't leave me!”

The guards pushed Charles back. At that moment, Jesse Jackson turned around, looked over the heads of the crowd, and saw Charles. “Hey, he's with me,” he said, pointing through the crowd toward Charles. “He's with me.”

The guards parted the crowd, and Charles slipped through the gate.

Charles Lee once used this illustration in a funeral sermon. He spoke of the life that the

deceased had lived, but then he said, “Still, our hope, when our life is over, is that Jesus Christ will look through the gate and say, ‘That one is with me.’”

May each of us live with the hope that Christ will say of us, at the end, “That one’s part of my flock. That one is spoken for.”

Please remember these strong, reassuring words when you come to your times, as we all do, of doubt, uncertainty, and wandering. All of us are subject to various voices that tempt us away from our relationship with Christ. They lure, “You are a self-made person. Think for yourself. Accumulate all the stuff you can to protect yourself from an uncertain future. Get a gun and learn how to use it well: it’s your only security. Why waste your time at church? You’ve got better things to do. Faith is fantasy; stick with the facts and live your life on the basis of what you can prove to yourself.”

But then, even amid the seduction of the world’s demonic sirens, you hear another voice: “This one is mine, and no one will snatch this one out of my hand.”

That’s our one, best hope. You are claimed. You have been spoken for. And once Jesus has claimed you, he will never, ever let you go. Thanks be to God. Amen.