

Fritz Kreisler was one of the best violinists the world has known. A story is told of Kreisler as he once traveled from Hamburg, Germany to give a concert in London. Kreisler had about an hour before his boat sailed, so he wandered into a music shop. The proprietor asked if he could look at the violin Kreisler was carrying. The store owner then vanished only to return accompanied by two policemen, one of whom told the violinist, “You are under arrest.”

“What for?” asked Kreisler.

The policemen responded, “You have Fritz Kreisler’s violin.”

Kreisler said, “I am Fritz Kreisler.”

The cop said, “You can’t pull that on us. Come along to the station.”

As Kreisler’s boat was soon to sail, he faced a crisis. His identity was being questioned and there was no time for prolonged explanations. Kreisler asked for his violin and played a piece for which he was well known. “Now are you satisfied?” he asked. They were. Kreisler’s identity was revealed through his **action** and the playing he exhibited. His **actions** spoke louder than any words he could have uttered regarding his identity.

In today’s reading from John’s gospel, we are plunged into a crisis – an identity crisis. In today’s gospel reading Jesus’ identity is again being

questioned by the religious leaders. It is the middle of winter and the festival of Dedication, a festival now known as Hanukkah. Jesus is walking in the Temple, in the portico of Solomon – the place from which the king would render judgments upon those seeking justice. And, it is in that place where Jesus again responds to questions about **his** identity. The religious leaders who wish to discredit Jesus taunt him and demand to know just who he thinks he is. They say, “Hey, Jesus, stop keeping us in the dark. If you’re the Messiah, just tell us straight out. Just who are you, Jesus? What are you up to and how long are you going to annoy us?”

Now, in John’s gospel, Jesus’ identity has been revealed from the very **beginning** and, throughout the gospel, Jesus has been revealing himself as **God’s light in the world**. He has been healing people, opening the eyes of the blind and giving the people around him numerous, multiple insights into his identity. He has been demonstrating and revealing who he is through the entirety of his ministry. So, he now responds by saying, “I told you, but you don’t believe. Everything I have done has been authorized by my Father, actions that speak louder than words. You don’t believe because you are not my sheep. You don’t recognize the voice of the shepherd among you.”

Jesus uses the metaphor of sheep and shepherd, a metaphor **very** familiar to people of that time and place, one that is threaded throughout scripture and helps more fully articulate his **identity**. However, **we** are not always able to fully grasp an understanding of this metaphor. It really is quite foreign to our context and experience. At the time of Jesus, **all** the sheep of the village – the entire village – were kept in one place, one fenced in field. And, when it was time for each of the owners to take their sheep back home, each shepherd would call his own sheep by using a unique, special call. When the sheep heard that unique call, they recognized the voice and they would leave the fenced in field to follow **their** shepherd home.

So, in today's reading, Jesus frames his identity and role in terms of being the **good** shepherd. He frames his identity as the **trusted voice** to whom the sheep will listen and follow. He frames his identity as the **good** shepherd by **claiming** those sheep the Father has given him as his very own. And, he makes a promise. He says **no one** will snatch his sheep out of the Father's hand. He boldly articulates his identity when he claims that everything he has done has been authorized by the Father. And, he then makes this remarkable claim; he announces that he and the Father are one – he and the father are of the **same mind**. Jesus is saying that he and

God are **united** in the work they do. He is saying it is impossible to distinguish his work from God's work, because he shares **fully** in God's work.

This reading is so meaningful for all of us as we live our daily lives. There are times in life when we experience great joy, and there are times when we experience enormous challenge and sorrow. Life encompasses a mix of all kinds of experiences. But, as we make this journey through all that life brings, Jesus' words to us today are steadfast words of promise. Jesus is speaking to each one of us. Jesus, the good shepherd, promises us **stubborn** protection and care. His is a voice the flock **hears** and **knows** and **follows**. And, **his** voice is especially precious in the mixedness of all that life brings. We cling to that voice. We cling to the promise that, even though life itself may be snatched away, **no one** will be snatched from the Father's hand and **not one person** will be snatched from God's immense love. We cling to the promise that we do **not** go on in vain, that the Good Shepherd walks **with** us, guiding us and protecting us in the depth of everything life lays before us. We listen and cling to the voice of our Shepherd, the voice that empowers and equips us with something greater than all else, the power of **love** – forgiving, transforming love. This is the power that raises up, this is the power that enabled Peter

to raise up Dorcas, this is the power that has infused this congregation and is raising **us** up as we move out of a pandemic, as we again boldly gather as God's people in this place, as we live into the ministry of the body of Christ in this place. This is the power of the **risen Christ!** This is the power that will **always** raise us up throughout our lives as we face all the challenges and joy and sorrow and grief, all the mixedness of life that we encounter. This is the power that gives us **our** true identity.

The late theologian, Fred Craddock, once told a story of an encounter he had when he and his wife were on vacation. Craddock said:

They were seated at a table in a restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. An elderly gentleman engaged them in conversation and when he found out Fred was a minister, he pulled up a seat, and said "I have to tell you a story." Little did Fred know at the time that the man who pulled up a seat was a former two-time governor of Tennessee, Ben Hooper.

Hooper told him, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church. I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married and the whole community knew it. In those days that brought shame. The reproach that fell on my mother, fell also on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who my father was. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone. In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. They had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face, a heavy beard, and a deep voice. I went just to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, a bastard. So, I would arrive just in time for the sermon, and when it was over, I would get

out of there quick because I was afraid someone would say, 'What's a boy like you doing in church?'

One Sunday some people lined up the aisle before I could get out. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. I could see out the corner of my eye his beard and his chin, and knew it was the minister. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and he seemed to stare at me for a while. I knew what he was doing. I knew that he was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, 'Well, boy, you're a child of . . .' and he paused. And I knew what was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, 'Boy, **you're a child of God**. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the backside and said, 'Now, you go claim your inheritance.'" Then the former governor of Tennessee told Fred, "I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life."

"You are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance." That's who **you** are. That's who I am. **We** are children of God. Jesus, the good shepherd, has raised us to new life and given each one of **us** a priceless identity – naming **us** and claiming **us** as God's very own. Go claim your inheritance and live into that identity.