

## **“Porch Talk”**

**John 10:22-31a**

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I like porches. I suppose this is because I grew up in a home which had a front and side porch. I recall playing on that porch with my friends while watching it rain, looking for rainbows, listening to birds and smelling newly mowed grass. At times, we would discuss the mysteries of life and faith by asking deep questions like, “Why did God create bugs and girls?” These are special memories I’ll always cherish.

The setting for today’s text is a porch. However, it is not anything like the porch of my childhood and perhaps yours. I doubt there were any Cracker Barrel rocking chairs on it.

This was a stately colonnade with magnificent pillars almost forty feet high attached to the eastern side of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was known as Solomon’s Porch and was a favorite gathering place for people to have meaningful dialogues about the mysteries of life and faith. Our text includes one of these conversations.

Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Dedication, which we know as Hanukkah. This festival commemorates the purification of the Temple in 164 B.C. after Syrian leader, Antiochus Epiphanes, turned it into a brothel and shrine to Zeus. Judas Maccabeus led a revolt which resulted in expelling the Seleucid monarchy from Jerusalem so the Temple could be reclaimed and cleansed. To this day, our Jewish friends celebrate this significant event in their history in the same month we celebrate Christmas.

While at this festival, Jesus was surrounded by some of the religious leaders who were already upset with him. “How long will you keep us in suspense?” they asked him. “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus responded, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep.

My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is

greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Having said this we are told "the Jews picked up stones to stone him" John 10:24-31a.

When I read this story, I am intrigued by the anger of the people surrounding Jesus that day on Solomon's Porch and the courage of Jesus. Even a casual reading of this text reveals both.

**Why were the Jews, especially the scribes and Pharisees, so angry with Jesus?** It had to do with what he was saying and doing.

First of all, they believed he was guilty of blasphemy when he said he and God were one. Beyond this, though, the scribes and Pharisees were upset because Jesus was exposing their hypocrisy and criticizing them for not being good shepherds, much like Ezekiel condemned the leaders of his time.

Life and ministry were about them, not the people who needed their help with the struggles of everyday living. It was about accumulating wealth, feeding their egos, holding on to power and living comfortably.

As a result, many of the scribes and Pharisees were not using their power responsibly, but for their own benefit. They had misplaced their priorities and forgotten or blatantly disobeyed the principles of the covenant their ancestors made with God.

Missing from their lives were integrity, honesty, humility, compassion, generosity, mercy, kindness, unselfishness, patience, repentance, forgiveness and peacemaking. They were far more concerned with building bloated bureaucracies, designing elaborate worship services and enforcing burdensome rules than building bridges of goodwill and understanding to all people.

When Jesus would not adopt their values or methods, they became incensed.

When he refused to take up the sword and run the Romans out of Jerusalem, becoming a second Judas Maccabaeus, they turned against him.

When he called common people like fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples, they were appalled.

When he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, which many of them watched from a distance, they were aghast.

When he accepted dinner invitations from those filthy traitors called tax collectors, they were outraged.

When he befriended Gentiles and women, even traveling through Samaria instead of around it, they were insulted.

When he healed people on the Sabbath, they were indignant.

When he taught his followers to love their enemies, pray for those who hurt them, turn the other cheek and carry a Roman's luggage an extra mile, they were dumbfounded.

Finally, when he said, as the Good Shepherd, he reflected the heart and nature of God in the way he spoke and lived, they became enraged and wanted to stone him to death.

**Do you think Jesus knew the scribes and Pharisees were this angry?** Sure, this was not their first attempt to kill him, and of course, it would not be their last.

**Why did Jesus continue speaking out and challenging them?** Why didn't he tone down the rhetoric or avoid them?

Above all, he wanted to be faithful to God. One thing Jesus meant when he said he and the Father were one was that they were one in mission and purpose. Being prophetic and confronting the scribes and Pharisees were what God sent him to do. This was his mission and he was determined to carry it out faithfully.

Jesus wanted to be a Good Shepherd. He wanted to take care of the people he came to serve and protect them from evil predators. This, too, was his mission.

I also think Jesus wanted to reform Judaism by convincing the leaders to change their ways. He wanted to persuade them to confess their sins and repent. He wanted them to live by God's values outlined in the ancient covenant God made with their ancestors, not the world's values. So he kept talking to them and appealing to their better judgment, but they refused to listen.

**Who is telling you something you don't want to hear?** Who is trying to have a candid conversation with you about your values and priorities? Who feels you are off track and are heading down the wrong road?

Who remembers when you lived by the Golden Rule and were known as being truthful, honest, reliable, thoughtful and respectful?

Who knew you when you had a good heart and were compassionate, merciful and kind?

Who remembers when you were unselfish and generous, eager to share with those in need?

Who knew you when you were humble and willing to ask for forgiveness and grant it?

Who remembers when you were faithful in worship, volunteered to help with the ministries of the church and tithed to support those ministries?

Who knew you when you sought God's will each day so you could honor God with all your decisions?

Who wonders what happened to this person and wants to talk to you about it?

**How are you responding to them?** Do you see yourself in the reaction of the scribes and Pharisees that day on Solomon's Porch when Jesus tried to reason with them? Are you looking for some stones?

**Why do we get angry when someone who loves us is this honest with us?** Why do we close our ears when someone tells us something we don't want to hear? Why do we become defensive and argumentative?

While we know we are not perfect, we struggle to listen to someone who points out our flaws. Often, we prefer to live in denial, even at others' expense.

When people are honest with us, it also confronts us with the need to change, which never comes easily. Change requires a lot of soul searching and humility. It is not easy to see ourselves as others see us and make changes.

I know someone who can help you, though. He knows your name and loves you in spite of your flaws. He wants to protect you from all harm, even the harm you inflict upon yourself. He wants to bring the best out in you so you can live up to your potential and reflect the heart and nature of God.

Will you ask the Good Shepherd to help you this morning become a better listener and get back on track?