

THE SECOND-CHANCE A SERMON ON JOHN 10:22-42

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

In Winston-Salem, NC, there is a wonderful place called *Prodigals House*. It is a community of people who are committing their lives to Christ and working to overcome addiction and criminal behavior. They have an intensive residential program, and when you go there for worship, you can feel a palpable sense of joy. These are people who are experiencing freedom in the Holy Spirit — freedom from the chains of drug addiction, prostitution, and self-destructive behavior. In response, they erupt in praise to Jesus Christ, who set them free indeed. Most of the residents in Prodigals House were at the bottom of a pit — their lives were so messed up that they needed a new beginning. They needed a fresh start. They taught me that God gives second chances. Our God offers another opportunity to respond in faith. Our God never gives up offering second chances, and today's passage illustrates that one point — that our God is the God of Second Chances.

The background on this passage is that some time has elapsed between the Good Shepherd discourse early in John 10 and this episode. The Feast of Dedication was the wintertime celebration that has today been translated into Hanukkah — it eight day festival of joy and celebration. Because it commemorates a miraculous provision of wick and oil to light the Temple, it is called the Feast of Lights.

Here at the Feast of Lights, Jesus is confronted by a group of people. Their immediate request is for Jesus to speak plainly — is he or is he not the messiah. Now, if you've been following this series, you'll find this an incredibly absurd question. We've seen over the course of the past year that nearly every statement Jesus makes in the gospel of John points back to an Old Testament prophetic hope of the Messiah. Because the Israelites of that time would have been thoroughly versed in the Old Testament, only the most obtuse dullard could have failed to grasp that Jesus was claiming to be and acting like the Messiah. We have to conclude that either these questioners were just such dullards or that they are not being genuine — considering the flow of the story, I'm inclined to believe the latter. These are people with an agenda. They are slyly trying to trip up this Jesus fellow for their own purposes. Here is the text from John 10:

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's

Colonnade. The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came — and the Scripture cannot be broken — what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true." And in that place many believed in Jesus.

Jesus answers these sneaky religious leaders with his usual clarity, exposing their falsity. Using the sheep metaphor again, contrasts his followers with those who refuse to follow. Again we hear some of the same themes as last week — Jesus followers hear his voice, which implies understanding, acceptance and obedience. Jesus' sheep will enter good pastureland — this time in terms of eternal life. And Jesus sheep will be protected so securely that they can never be taken from his hand. Jesus says to these people that they don't believe this truth because they are not of his sheep!

Here, digression is in order. We've seen hints all throughout this gospel, but here it is unavoidable. Here we come up against the word *predestination*. This word has become something of a nasty term to many people. It refers to the doctrine that God, in his divine rule as king over all, has elected to single out certain persons as his chosen people. In the Old Testament, we saw this operating in Israel, the descendants of Abraham, as his chosen people. Now in the New Testament, Jesus talks about his sheep. Many people have problems with this doctrine because it seems to make God into a Great Puppet Master who pulls our strings and makes us dance to his tune. They say that the doctrine invalidates human choice and makes us nothing better than a bunch of machines. They call it *fatalism* and a brutal thing to believe. How can you have second chances with such a doctrine?

Now here's the truth about it. The Bible teaches divine sovereignty — the idea that everything in the heavens and the earth belongs to God because he made it. It is up to him how he disposes of his possessions, and he is well within his rights to do as he pleases with all his creatures, including us. The Bible also teaches human responsibility — the idea that our decisions and actions are indeed ours. They have consequences both temporal and eternal, and we are responsible for the consequences. The Bible holds both these ideas simultaneously — and lest you think that it's a matter of different authors in different books, look at Philippians 2:12-13 "... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." The ancients didn't seem to have any problem holding divine sovereignty and human responsibility simultaneously. These doctrines don't exist for you to judge on someone else's salvation, nor do they enable us to predict the future. Rather they make clear to us God's claim on our lives in this moment, and our responsibility to respond to that claim in faith. You see the point of these two doctrines is always for you to focus on yourself and your standing with God — and that's exactly how they function here.

Notice that Jesus says "you do not listen because you are not of my sheep" then he talks about all the qualities of his sheep, ending his discourse with "I and the Father are one," at which point, his hearers pick up stones to stone him. The careful reader of John knows what's going to happen next, because he remembers 7:30 when Jesus was in the temple and his opponents tried to seize him and he slipped away. Again, at the end of chapter 8 — Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am" his opponents pick up stones, and then he disappears. So now, again says something controversial, they get ready to stone him, and Jesus ... stops them. He says "Now wait a minute — I have shown you many great miracles from the Father — for which of these do you stone me?" Why does Jesus stop them here, when he just disappeared so many times before? Certainly, he's showing that his opponents were more interested in their agenda than in faithful interpretation of Scripture, but he's had ample opportunity to demonstrate that. Why does he now stop his opponents? Why does he face

off against people he has said are not his sheep and say “Wait, just try believing in me. Have you seen the miracles I’ve done? Believe in me that you might know the Father.”

Why? Because he’s giving them a second chance. His entire ministry has been about second chances. The woman at the well who was so ashamed because of her sin; a second chance for blind beggars who had given up all hope on life; a second chance for Nathaniel, who had become so cynical about life. Even those who reject him, he gives a second chance to those who shake their fist in his face — indeed he has kept coming back to Jerusalem and giving a second, third, fourth and fifth chance. And still they reject him. And here, Jesus, knowing that the next time he comes to Jerusalem, he comes to die at these peoples hands, even now he offers another chance.

We talk about divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but those concepts fade away when you are faced in the moment with the calling of Jesus Christ upon your life and you have to say, “What am I going to do?” Those of you who are not disciples, you are confronted today with Jesus claim as Lord over your life — what are you going to do? If you have rejected him in the past, he’s giving you a second chance today? What are you going to do? Especially those of us who are disciples need second chances. How many good intentioned resolutions have we dropped? How many kindnesses have we left undone? How many injuries have we failed to apologize for? How many times have we ignored God’s clear teaching for our own convenience or comfort? Christians need second chances. How will you respond? Will you pick up a stone and say “I don’t need him” or will you go to him in your quiet place and pour out your heart and wallow in grace?

Unfortunately, the hearers in this story chose to pick up stones, and again, Jesus escaped their grasp. But the postscript to the story offers us some hope. Jesus slipped away from Jerusalem back to the other side of the Jordan River. There, out in more rural backward country, we see people coming to him based on the testimony of John the Baptist, expressing their faith. It is three years later and now John’s testimony is bearing fruit. These people respond to their second chance.

Whatever your struggle today, no matter what it is you are struggling with or burdened with, Jesus gives you a second chance today. Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Jesus offers you the chance to lay your burdens down at his feet and pick up again with a life of discipleship and joy — the life for which you were made. He gives you a second chance. What are you going to do with it?