

May 12, 2019
The Fourth Sunday in Easter
John 10:22-30
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After Holy Week I went to the House of Prayer at St. John's University for a few days. I went there in part to renew and refresh after the busyness of Holy Week. But also to spend time in quiet reflection. As it turned out I had the entire place to myself. And it was a wonderful surprise. To have even a few days without structure – no calendar events, no email, no phone was an incredible gift. The time I spent there made space for the kind of deep reflection that I have not experienced in some time. The daily cycle of prayer, time with my journal, the unique solitude of the oratory and some walks around the campus made those days a true blessing. I will not bore you with all the workings of my mind and spirit while I was there. But there was one experience from that time that I want to share with you today.

During my first night there, at 3:45AM actually, there was a knock on the door of my room. Just two raps. Knock, knock. Not really hard, but sharp enough to wake me. To say the least, I was surprised. I wasn't really all that excited to get out of my warm comfortable bed. So, I said hello in my it's 3:45 AM-and-I've-just-awakened voice. There was no response. So, I tried again, this time with more authority. Again, there was no response. To be honest I was too spooked to get up to see if there was actually someone there. But I couldn't hear any movement in the hallway. So, I went back to sleep and thought no more about it. Until the next day when I the experience wormed its way back into my thoughts. It brought to mind Jesus words in Revelation: Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking: if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me (Rev. 3:20). And that left me to wonder how many times Jesus has knocked on the door and I haven't responded.

I think that is the question that Jesus is posing to those gathered around him in today's lesson. I know he doesn't say that in so many words, but we still might think of his reply as, when will you start to believe what you see with your own eyes? The scene in today's lesson is enriched with details of timing, location and setting that are interesting. The story takes place in winter, during Hanukah, which celebrates the re-dedication of the temple almost two centuries before Jesus time. We are told that Jesus was walking in Solomon's Portico when the events in the story happen. Solomon's portico was a colonnade located on the eastern wall of the temple. The historian Josephus tells us that Jesus' followers

continued to meet there after his death. The story takes place in a location where gentiles would be welcome. So, why the focus on the Jews? These details are important to the story I'm sure. But I haven't a clue why.

There is less ambiguity about the setting, but we have to explore the language a bit more in depth to see it. The NRSV translation says that the people were "gathered around" Jesus. But the term translated as "gathered around" has a meaning more like being encircled or besieged. So, we might rightly guess that this was not an altogether casual encounter. The question the crowd asks has an almost plaintive tone. How long will you keep us in suspense? But a literal translation of that question would be, how long do you take our life (soul) from us? That sounds more provocative. It is probably more accurately rendered as, how long will you provoke us? Even framed that way it sounds a bit more challenging. And Jesus response is equally challenging. "I have told you and you do not believe". But, except for the woman of Samaria (4:26), he has not told anyone that he is the Messiah. And he does not say so in this instance. What he does say is something much more radical I think. He claims oneness with God. And that his unity with God is the source of his acts and they in turn are signs of who he is. And he has done many acts. By this point in the story, Jesus has performed six of the seven signs that are the hallmarks of John's Gospel. He has turned water into wine, healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, restored mobility to the paralyzed, fed several thousand people from meager provisions and walked on water. These are things that those gathered around Jesus have observed with their own eyes or heard about from others. But apparently it is not enough. Seeing is not believing.

At this point we might be tempted to wonder a bit at their incredulity. But we have our own experience with seeing and believing to wonder about. We are constantly bombarded with reports that try to tell us that the things we see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears are not real. We are told that violent crime is decreasing in our society. And yet we hear reports of deadly violence with increasing frequency. On our streets, in our schools and even in our most sacred places. Domestic abuse shelters in our own city are full of people who have had to flee violence in their own homes. And it's not just here in our city and our country. Borders all over the world are crossed daily by people seeking safety for themselves and their families. Lately, like most of you, I have been following the events at our southern border. I watch and wonder. What it would take for me to do that? To pack up whatever I could carry. To leave behind everything I had ever known. And head off into an uncertain future. Oh, we joke about it for sure. Remember people threatening to move to Canada if Donald Trump was elected President? Well, guess what? He got elected and they're all probably still here.

The truth is most of us cannot imagine what it would take for us to pack up and leave our homes. But we can imagine the sense of desperation that must be driving such a decision. And it does not match up with the picture that is being painted of this situation. And that's the point of this. The disconnect between what we are asked to believe about other people and what we see with our own eyes troubles us. We see the fear and suffering in their faces and our hearts are filled with compassion. It is an ache that will not leave us alone. And here's what I wonder about that. Is that compassion that burns in our hearts Jesus knocking on the door? Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus is the burning of our hearts within us a sign of Jesus presence? Is that his way of encouraging us to claim our place as his disciples and act on his behalf? I think the answer to those questions is yes. But that leaves us to wonder how we will respond. Amen.