

Sermon *Jesus Seeks Those Who Struggle*  
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 5.11.25

Today is Mother's Day. The lessons do not highlight motherhood in any particular way, but I have a question for you – what gifts did your mom give you? The question is not what gift are you giving your mom on Mother's Day; but, what gifts did your mom give to you that make who you are today?

My mom gave me many gifts; the two I'd like to focus on today are this: she taught me how to be inquisitive and that struggling at something is actually a good thing. First, with questions, she taught me to ask questions of myself and others. When I was young, I'd bring a new idea to her and she'd ask me why I think that way, what are the expected outcomes, is there a different way to look at the situation, etc. She is not being critical, she's just inquiring. I take that inquiring sense into reading the Bible too. I have questions about today's Gospel lesson (John 10:22-30). It seems like Jesus is being exclusionary to religious leaders – like telling them they are not allowed, or they can't hear his voice. That doesn't sit right with me because it doesn't match Jesus's behavior from the rest of the Gospel. We will get into that in a minute.

The second gift mom gave me was the understanding that struggling can be a good thing. She is a retired Junior High math teacher. To learn math is to struggle with math. Once one struggles with math, or other things in life, and then "gets it" that knowledge cannot be taken away. I didn't understand fractions. I struggled with it. But then when I finally understood, I have that knowledge with me today. Like learning to ride a bike, it's a struggle, but then it's something that one doesn't forget. At my college graduation ceremony, the president of the university told us that we all struggled to obtain our degree but now that degree cannot be taken away.

Jesus said that those who the Father has given him cannot be taken away from his hand. Those who struggle with faith and then come to an understanding, they cannot be taken away.

Let's go back to the inquisitive side for a moment. Some religious leaders surrounded Jesus (or he surrounded himself with them, the text is not clear) and they said, "How long will you keep us in suspense, tell us plainly if you are the messiah." First off, that's not what they said, word for word, from Greek to English (John wrote this Gospel in Greek). Here is what they asked: "How long will you take away our life?" [*Life* is "*psyche*" in plural form; I am making the leap that it would be understood as our-life and not their combined psychological behavior.] Obviously, Jesus was not taking away their life. This was a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish idiom. It is difficult to actually know what they meant by that phrase. John the Gospel writer knew it but how do we, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, in English, represent that phrase. I don't like the translation "how long will you keep us in suspense" because the onus is placed on Jesus like the director of a movie that is holding something back from the audience. Theologians have entertained this phrase as an English substitution: why are you keeping us guessing at who you really are?

Why? That's a good question from the religious leaders to Jesus. We are instructed to seek, to ask, and to knock. Why is he keeping them guessing? He's inviting them to struggle for a while with faith because then they'll get it. Once they get it, they'll always have it. But they have to struggle first.

Now that sounds like Jesus.

Throughout the entire Gospel, Jesus seeks those who struggle. He cured those who could not see or hear or walk. He healed those who were not in their right mind. He talked to those who struggled to be accepted into communal and religious life. He touched those who struggled with staying clean (in a religious, and also in a very practical, sense). He also sought out those who struggled with matters of faith, belief and Mosaic law. The religious leaders who Jesus talked to at the Temple of Solomon during the feast we know as Hanukkah were struggling with matters of Law and faith. Jesus told them that those who continually seek to hear his voice are his sheep; translated (incorrectly in my opinion) as “My sheep hear my voice.” That translation is too definitive. The way I read the Greek passage is that his sheep are the ones who, with ears like a sheep that are pointed up and are constantly listening, are continually seeking to hear him. As such, the religious leaders gathered around him could also open the ears of their heart to hear what Jesus was saying so that the works (miracles) that he is doing would make sense.

One last thing, the religious leaders got upset when Jesus said, “The Father and I are one.” I think a better translation in 21<sup>st</sup> century English is this: The Father and I are the same thing. In other words, I can’t help to do these works (miracles) because this is what God does – God opens the ears and the eyes of people to see and hear; God lifts up those who cannot walk; God helps those get into their right mind; God is with those who struggle. Jesus and the Father are the same thing so the things that are happening are a direct result of God’s presence being with them in the here and now. I hear that as an invitation for the people who are “guessing” at who Jesus is to open their hearts and minds to struggle with and then to know that God is with them.

What are you struggling with? Are there matters of faith that you question? Jesus is with us as we struggle. He is encouraging us to ask questions, to seek after him, and for our ears to be open to the hearing of his voice.