I Know My Sheep

 Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. What does it take to truly get to know someone? Who is it in your life that you know the best? Whose actions can you anticipate and predict with almost pinpoint accuracy? My parents and my brother tell me to this day that they know me better than I know myself. I say the same about them. To a certain extent it’s true. We all know which buttons to push in order to make each other explode. We’ve shared so many experiences together that at this point it would be difficult not to know the most intimate details about one another. How well do you know your families? Can you predict how they’ll respond to certain situations? I bet right now you can picture your family’s reaction to receiving good news and bad news. What about our friends? How long did it take for you to form the special bond with the person that you consider your closest friend, the friend that you can confide anything in, the friend that you can depend on to be straight with you and tell you when you’ve gone off the reservation? Did you find that person after meeting them once or did it take a few interactions? Perhaps it took months or even years for you to find the person that you consider to be your best friend. I met my best friend in 5th grade. Where I grew up we had 4 different elementary schools that split the community’s children from kindergarten through 4th grade. When 5th grade came around all of our elementary schools were combined. Suddenly there were kids in my classes that I had never met before, even though I had only lived half a mile away from them. That was the case with me and my friend Tyler. And you know what’s funny? For the first six months we knew each other we hated each other. I mean we seriously disliked one another. We would call each other names, and not in the playful way, we would start rumors about one another, we would even attempt to get each other in trouble with the teacher. I don’t know how many times in those first few months we had to spend lunch with our teacher as punishment for something we did to one another. Those first six months were not fun. As we look back on it now, we can admit that neither one of us looked forward to coming to school in those days. But in that third grading period something changed. We had certain classes that rotated like music, art, health, and shop class. For that third grading period we had shop class and Tyler and I were put at the same table. Pretty soon after that class started we began to get along better. We started sitting at the same lunch table, playing at recess, even hanging out after school. It happened so fast that I really can’t explain how it happened. And now 17 years later other friends have come and gone out of our lives. We’ve shared breakups, personal struggles, and even had our own stubborn conflicts with one another. I think it’s safe to say that we know each other pretty well. Think about your best friend. How well do you know them? How well can you predict what they are going to do? Can you read their minds?

 What about your relationship with God? How well do you know him? What about Jesus? How well do you know him? I confess to you that I myself have had my own difficulties with my relationship with God. There are times in which I don’t understand why things are happening the way that they are. I know that I’m not alone in that either. So, what of your relationship with God? Our reading from Acts perhaps gives us some intuition about ourselves sometimes. Peter says, “**This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.**” Now first I think that it is important to point out that by this statement Peter is telling the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and all the other religious leaders that they have done wrong by the people. They have led them astray by attempting to build their faith without a firm foundation. It was the job of these people to present the word of God and tell of his deeds and salvation. Instead they had become blinded by their own influence. They had become greedy and more concerned with money and power to be concerned with teaching the true word of God. It is clear from this speech, that these people did not know God very well. They rejected his salvation. They even brought into question miracles performed in his name. How often do we do the same? How often do we discard the cornerstone of our faith for something else? Around the turn of the century there were popular bracelets with the letters W.W.J.D. meaning what would Jesus do. Now while they surely were a fad and I can hardly find anyone that wears them anymore I think it provided people with a meaningful opportunity to sit and reflect on their actions. Someone cuts you off in traffic, and as your raising your hand to give a salute there are those letters, W.W.J.D. It’s Sunday morning and your alarm is going off. We’re now at the decision point, which for me is after about four snoozes. Your arm is about to go for that final snooze that will shut the alarm off and leave you to sleep in peace for an extra couple of hours, then you see those letters, W.W.J.D. There are certain situations where we know what Jesus would do. But in order to know what Jesus would do, you have to know Jesus and who he is. It has become clear to that the knowledge of who Jesus is is fading into the background. His words are being misconstrued to mean things that are ungodly. It has become popular to mention that Jesus loved everybody for who they were. After all why would he eat with sinners and tax collectors if he didn’t accept them for who they were? So now we are told that we have to accept ourselves and other for who they are. But why? What purpose would it serve to simply blindly accept people and their behavior? Shouldn’t we have standards? Certainly, Jesus had standards. In fact, there are multiple examples where Jesus explains the standards that he has and these builders that Peter is speaking to are not making the grade. They are not preaching the true word of God, therefore the people that are listening to them have no hope of learning who Jesus is. In our Gospel lesson for today this is addressed as Jesus says, “**He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.**” Today there are many hired hands watching over God’s sheep. There are many who claim to preach the word of God, but instead will seek to serve their own needs as soon as the opportunity arises. In fact, to be even broader, there are many who are followers of Jesus, but will abandon him and his word as soon as it conflicts with their schedule or any other litany of excuses.

 All of this discussion however begs the question, “how are we supposed to find out who Jesus is?” If it is so important for us to discover who this person is, what is it that we have to do in order to learn that information? Do we have to deprive ourselves of worldly pleasures and live in a cave? Do we have to all become monks and nuns, studying scripture from dawn till dusk? It’s interesting because for centuries these were the modes by which people felt they came to know God. But these are not the means by which we come to know Jesus. For as Martin Luther wrote in his explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” It is an impossible task for us to raise ourselves up to believe in Christ. So what can we do? Well what we can do is we can receive the gifts that are offered to us. After all, it is through those gifts that God reveals himself to us. That is the manner in which we come to know him. We come to know him as though we are sheep in need of a shepherd. Once we realize how good the true gifts of God are we come to recognize his voice. When we lower the standards that God has we demean his gifts. If God accepted us for who we are, then why on earth are we here. Why do we take communion? Why do we confess our sins? What is the point if we are simply accepted for who we are? But Jesus tells us that because of who we are, he lays his life down for us. You see it might be hard for us to truly know God and understand Jesus’ teaching. But he knows us. He has known us since the very beginning. Our God is not one that is far off. Our God is not some watchmaker that sits back in observation, no. Our God is very involved in our daily lives. Our God seeks to have an intimate, personal relationship with us. After all, even the hairs on our heads have been numbered. The way that God shows us how well he knows us is through his gifts. He knows that we put our schedule before him. He knows that there are other things that we’d rather be doing, instead of taking some time to read scripture or spend some time in prayer. And because he knows us so well he offers us gifts. He offers us the gift of forgiveness. He offers us the gift of his Holy Spirit so that we might have a chance of getting to know him better in order to foster our relationship with him. He offers us the gift of daily bread. Through giving, God shows us who he is. Jesus is the same way. Through Jesus’ preaching and teaching we learn that he is the Son of God. Through Jesus death he reveals that he is our savior. Through his resurrection he reveals the true power that God has unleashed on behalf of his people. He has unleashed the power of life everlasting for us. Through all of this we learn that our God is a giving God. He is a merciful God. That is how we learn and come to recognize who God is, through his gifts and through his protection from our adversaries of death and Satan. Jesus tells us, “I know my own and my own know me… and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Jesus tells us 4 times that he lays down his life of his own accord in this passage. He says this because he knows that we cannot do the same. We cannot lay down our lives and achieve the same result. So Jesus does it for us, willingly. Our God knows us better that we know ourselves. He has known us since the very beginning. He has had plans for us since the very beginning. Those plans end with us being welcomed into eternity to be with our heavenly father and all those faithful saints that have been called to rest before us. Given that it is still the season of Easter that is what we celebrate this day. We celebrate our new-found hope in our own resurrection, in our own anticipation for the day that we will be brought in to see what perfection looks like. This doesn’t happen because we know our shepherd, but rather because our shepherd knows his sheep. And even though the sheep can become rowdy and hard to manage, our shepherd loves us still the same. Our shepherd still leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, to the still waters of baptism where he restores our souls. Now we anxiously await the day our shepherd will come back to open the gates to the vibrant and lush pastures of eternal glory. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.