

I love porches. Front porches, back porches, side porches. I mean, who doesn't love a porch, with its invitation to come and sit for a while. It's one of the great privileges of my job that almost every week I get to visit with people—with you—and this week I got to have two visits that took place on porches. It was delightful. There was fresh fruit, lemonade, and rocking chairs involved one day, and the next day there was fresh fruit, coffee, and the gentle sound of rain hitting the roof above us. In one of my porch visits I even got to spend time with Charlotte and Vivian Green. My parents have a front porch, side porch, and back porch at their house. I go there and I can never decide where I want to sit. So, I spend a little time on each. Porches are made for long conversations, or for reading long books, or for long naps, or just long periods of restfulness spent not thinking about anything at all. If Sundays are meant to be a day of Sabbath rest, then I think every church ought to have a porch. Sabbath and porch, they just go together. I like to imagine it was a Sabbath when, according to John, Jesus was strolling along the porch of the temple. It was winter and time for the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem, because the Festival of Dedication always happens in winter. Think Franklin Farm. Anyone go to Franklin Farm here in Cumberland to do some gardening? An old dairy farm located on Abbot Run Valley Road, it now functions as a 501c3 organization that welcomes people of all ages to come and learn about the value of conservation and sustainable agriculture through gardening. Even cooler, I've seen how the produce grown at the farm is donated to our local food pantry so that people who don't have enough to eat can come and get healthy, naturally grown vegetables. Something that would otherwise be too expensive for them to buy. Talk about an important ministry to be a part of. In the spring, you can help plant cucumbers, lettuce, and tomatoes. In the summer, you can help water, weed and pick. In the fall, you can go and harvest everything that is left. Gather up all the pieces and see just how great is the bounty. So that when winter comes, the hungry won't have to go hungry. We'll still be able to dedicate ourselves to the work of feeding them.

This is a pretty good picture of what Jesus is doing in Jerusalem. It's winter and he's come for the Festival of Dedication, to be part of the joyful work of opening the temple doors so the poor and hungry can come in and shop the shelves, fill a bag, maybe get a warm meal and a safe place to sleep for a night. He knows what the prophet Isaiah has said about the temple and how things should go:

Is not this the service that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
and to let the oppressed go free?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly.<sup>1</sup>

When he gets to the temple he might expect someone to ask him to help sort cans. "Can you put all the corn on the top shelf and all the chicken soup on the bottom?" Or maybe to say grace before the meal, or better yet, to take the 10 loaves of donated bread and magically turn them into 20. After all, he is Jesus. But instead, John never even tells us if Jesus gets inside the temple. He's strolling along the porch. It's winter. Maybe there's snow on the ground and he can see his breath puffing out against the cold air. I can believe that on every side of him as he walked were masses of huddled people, sitting with their backs against the wall, trying to do what they could to stay warm while they waited for the doors to open, and that as he walked, Jesus had to step over them.

"Excuse me friend," someone tugs at his coat sleeve, "are you who I think you are? Are you the Messiah? I've heard you preach. I've heard about the miracles you've done. What I really want to know, though, is, are you the Messiah?"

Every Jew in Jesus' day believed in the coming of a Messiah, in someone who would take back the kingdom and the power and the glory from Rome and restore it to Israel. Now they want to know, "Are you him, Jesus?"

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 58:6-8

“I have told you, and yet you do not believe. The works I do in God’s name testify to who I am. If you want to know my character, my humanity, just look at what I do.”

“Yes, yes, Jesus, we’ve seen what you can do, and we’ve got some thoughts of our own about whether you could be the Messiah, but we want to hear it from you. Tell us plainly, are you the Messiah?”

What these Jews are pointing to is the difference between reputation and identity. They are not the same thing we know, and sometimes we have to decide which one we’re going to care about more: reputation or identity.

After I graduated college and before I went to seminary, I worked as a social worker at a shelter for homeless families in the Boston area where I had a woman on my case management list who had two teenage boys, an infant daughter, and who had lived and survived more hardship than I would probably ever know. She was also twice my age. As a resident at the shelter, she had to agree to certain rules about not drinking, not hitting her children, and not coming in after curfew. I don’t know if this woman had ever done any of these things or if she would have ever done any of these things, but she had to say she wouldn’t. And every month, when her paycheck came from the grocery store where she was working, and when her child support check came, she had to deposit them in the bank and bring me the receipt proving that she had done so. I don’t know how she felt about the arrangement. I would guess she didn’t feel very good about it. I on the other hand was 23 and feeling important, very important, and powerful. Until one day I noticed that she had a new car.

“How did you get that car?” I demanded of her.

“What do you mean, how did I get that car?” she said back to me. “What does it matter how I got the car?”

“I mean, how did *you* get that car. I know you can’t afford it. And even if you could, you know that you don’t get to decide how you’re going to spend your money. *You’re homeless!*”

I said it. I couldn’t believe I said it. I couldn’t believe I would even think it. I knew better. Maybe the car had been a gift. Maybe she bought it with her hard-earned money.

“Having a car means I’ve got a little normal back,” she told me. “It means I can take my kids to the park without having to let them see me scrounge for bus fare. It means I’m

being a good mother. It means things you'll probably never have to know about. What are you here for anyway?"

What was I here for? She was right. I didn't know. I knew what I was known for. I knew my reputation, but I did not know my identity. For Jesus however, the question, who are you? is not a matter only of reputation or identity, but of union and belonging.

"The works that I do in God's name testify to who I am, 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. 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."

Jesus calls us sheep. Do you know why? Because sheep are dumb. You put a flock of sheep in front of a green pasture and a hillside of rocks and there's a good chance they'll go for the rocks. And this even when they have a good, loving shepherd watching out for them. It's like with my dog Quimby. I'll be out in the yard throwing the ball to her when suddenly something will catch her attention over in the neighbor's yard. I know she's going to think about running off on me, so I'll say sternly, "Quimby, come here girl." And when that doesn't work, I'll say it lovingly. "Quimby, come here girl!" And when I know I haven't got a chance either way, I'll offer her a piece of bacon. And she'll turn and look right at me, with those trusting puppy dog eyes and her slobbery tongue half-hanging out of her mouth. "Oh, good girl. Come here." As she turns and runs off on me. And every time I go and get her and bring her home again. Why do I do this? Because if we do it often enough, sooner or later she might start to figure out that she belongs to me, and nothing can snatch her out of my hand.

When I was 23—and a lot of times even now at 38—when I was 23 and working at the shelter I forgot this. I forgot who belonged to me, and to whom I belonged. I forgot that with Jesus, the only basis for my identity and reputation is that I be one with God and if one with God than one with the lost, the poor, and disenfranchised, who very well might go for the rocks over the green pasture but who will never be snatched from Jesus' hand.

It was a few years after I had left my job at the shelter that I was sitting in my bedroom, now in seminary in New Jersey, when my phone rang. It was a woman named Sandy. We had worked together at the shelter and she had a message for me. "Melinda,"—that was

the woman's name—"Melinda called looking for you." Sandy gave me Melinda's number and later that evening I called her up.

"Melinda, it's David. How are you?"

She told me about her new apartment and how her two boys were now in high school and playing football and how her infant, no longer an infant, was now 4.

"I heard you're studying to be a priest," she added.

"Yeah, I guess you could call it that," I said.

"Well I was just wondering, I've never been to church but I was thinking about starting to go. Next time you're around, do you think I could go with you?"

"With me? You want to go with me?"

"Yeah. I mean, you do go to church, right?"

It was winter. Jesus was strolling along the porch of the temple when someone tugged on his coat to ask him, who are you? Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly. And pushing open the door of the temple, Jesus went in and took a loaf of bread from a table, and bringing it back outside he gave it to the hungry people, saying, "Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Is this plain enough for you?"