

Who are you, Jesus? Speak plainly!

Rev Bonnie LeValley May 12, 2019

Scripture – John 10: 22-30

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.”

“If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly”(v24) There are few things in life that we desire more than to have people say what they mean and mean what they say. Whether it is politicians offering rhetoric to enticing you to giving them your vote or preachers belittling Christians who have a hard time putting their faith into words, we are familiar with the appeal and the need for plain-talking leaders. The problem, of course, is that talking ‘plainly’ about those things which are inherently complex or even beyond our understanding can be misleading to the hearer. Gary Jones shares; “The trouble with talking plainly about God is that the things of God are anything but plain. When a person begins speaking using explicit certainty about God, this is a sure sign that the person, is no longer speaking about God. We can speak with unequivocal certainty about things our minds can grasp, but God is not one of those things. God grasps us: we do not grasp God.” God seeks us out long before we seek God. Christ makes his sheep: we do not make our shepherd. The initiative and authority of God, has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, “The Lord is my shepherd...He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters. And “Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

Often times in study groups earnest questions are asked, seeking to understand God’s intent and message in a particular passage; “What is God trying to tell us?” People think that if we can just crack the code, if one only persists and has the right faith everything will be made clear! It is not that straight forward. Bible study as in any life study or practice asks the participant to bring an open mind to the text which invites us to experience and participate in rich stories with multiple meanings. There may be multiple layers of meaning depending on your context and life circumstances. As I lead studies, I am mindful as I prepare for our sessions, that each group brings personal insights and God works through all of us to seek meaning and understanding in that moment. Most Sunday’s I begin my message with a prayer, “Dear God, either through me or in spite of me speak your word to your people. There is nothing plain about a God who speaks from a burning bush and is named “I am who I am!” The plain speaking

Baptist preacher Will Campbell once remarked that if Moses had reported this experience to his family and friends, they would likely have said, "It's time for medication!"

Jesus says to those demanding an answer that he has already told them plainly what they need to know. The trouble is that the way Jesus has told them is through his works. In other words, Jesus identity and role cannot be reduced to a title; instead his identity must be experienced. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his works. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life..." John 10:27-28 When I read the text, I wonder: If Jesus says believers/his sheep hear his voice and follow him, just how does that happen? If it is so, that your sheep hear your voice, then we grown-ups in the church should see that everyone, children, youth and adults learn to listen for the Shepherd's voice and follow where God leads. We really must do this, but how?

Persons who hear God best are in places of faith and homes that help persons learn to listen for the voice of God. Persons who learn to listen for the voice of God do so where the people, symbols and sacraments of the faith and in the practiced patterns and rituals of their families and church family. Sharing life in the Good Shepherd's "flock" creates the relationships, time and space for life's most important questions; and people get to see and try on roles they may later play.

There must always be a role for Christian understanding and reasoning. After all the first commandment is, "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all of your mind and with all of your strength. (Luke10:27) Our minds must be engaged in the discernment of faith and the ways of God. There are many who write best-selling books devoted largely to what they believe are intellectual falsehoods in religious teachings. Responding to their arguments, faithful Christians who believe God is beyond all understanding and concepts say, "Amen". However, fighting about who believes the right things about God, can keep the faithful entangled with words about God, instead of walking in the ways of God I believe we need to return to an genuine experience of God, recognizing that this experience will be beyond our understanding and powers of description.

A number of Sunday's ago, I asked the children during Children's time if they had questions they wanted to ask God. Their questions included: Is God male or female? How did God make the world? Why do people get sick? Why is there war? I cannot answer any of these questions. Not one of them! Yet, I want all the children and each of you to keep asking questions in this loving, nurturing, supportive flock of God's people at Kenmore United Methodist Church so that each person may recognize the shepherd's voice and follow the Shepherd faithfully. After all, the early church grew, not because multitudes were convinced of the truth of creeds and dogmas, but because multitudes experienced the living Lord and new life that was foolish to the wise.

Yesterday, we celebrated women who helped others hear God's voice, in the testimonies and witness of women's lives through their faithful witness and service. Women remembered included: Helen Urban who was known for her vitality, devotion to mission and social justice;

Ruth Whitehead who was kind, patient, encouraging and never said, “We don’t do it that way!”; Sharon Winegarden who always welcomes the stranger or those in need; Ginny Snyder whose loving, caring nature is a ray of sunshine inspiring others to catch a vision for mission of some kind where needs must be addressed and broken lives made whole, Barbara Weaver who is an encourager, supporter, friend, mentor and mission worker in God’s kingdom. Many others were named aloud and those gathered round tables pondered how their lives were different of following the Shepherd. I am certain that there are women who you recall who followed there God into many different pastures and guided you to pursue God’s voice in your own. Today would be a great day to honor them with your witness and give thanks to God.

What I heard in the testimonies is that each of those named called another to hear God’s voice, to ask questions and live in the fold! They invited others to belong to Jesus flock, to hear the voice of God, and in welcoming others to the journey, many came to believe.

And therein lies our hope and consolation. Debie Thomas shares, “According to this text, whatever belief we arrive at in this life will not come from the ups and downs of our own emotional life. It will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or a cleverly worded sermon. Rather it will come from the daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus’s flock — of walking in the footsteps of the Shepherd, living in the company of fellow sheep, and listening in real time for the voice of the one whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys. If we won’t follow him into those layered places — places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt — we will never belong to him at all.

I wonder if Jesus resisted the crowd’s question that day because it was so pitifully inadequate. What good would it have done if he’d stood up in the temple at their insistence and yelled, “Yes! Yes, in fact, I am the Christ!” Would anything have changed? Suddenly, would his parables, his countercultural teachings, and his strange miracles have coalesced into a neat package his listeners could tuck under their arms and carry home? I doubt it. Jesus was a storytelling rabbi — far more interested in formation than in formula. He was not sophisticated in his appearance at all! Yet, his reputation preceded him wherever he went.

Maybe, by refusing to “speak plainly,” Jesus was honoring human life for the incredibly complicated thing it is. After all, one doesn’t “speak plainly” about the greatest mysteries of the universe. Jesus came to teach us about truth, about love, and about eternal life. One doesn’t simply profess belief in such weighty and mysterious things— one lives into them, questions into them, believes into them, grows into them. One wrestles — and even in the wrestling, *belongs*.

I suspect that Jesus’s answer was not what the people in the temple that day wanted to hear. They wanted to believe from the outside. They wanted a version of proof that would not require them to step into the smelly sheep pen and muck around with the other sheep. They wanted certainty without risk. A Messiah who provides but does not provoke. *That* kind of “plain telling,” Jesus said, is not available. The only knowing he offered was knowing that happens *within* and *among* the fold. Why? Because the belief Jesus is interested in has little to do with our intellects. Or, rather it *exceeds* our intellects. To “believe” in the Gospel sense means to trust, to lean, to depend, to throw our lot in with. It’s an orientation of the heart and the gut. A willingness to stake everything we’ve got on the person, the character, the life, the death, and the resurrection of God’s Son. It’s learned through relationship.

In a beautiful sermon entitled, "Message in the Stars," Frederick Buechner makes the point this way: "It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle that we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get."

Sheep know their shepherd because they are *his*; they walk, graze, feed and sleep in his shadow, within constant earshot of his voice. They believe because they have surrendered to his care, his authority, his leadership, and his guidance. There is no belonging from the outside; Christianity is not a spectator sport. *Belong*, Jesus says. Belief will follow. Amen.

Unconventional Mother's Day Gifts

This Mother's Day take a moment to think of all the mothers in the world who are in need. There are millions of women in the world living on less than a dollar a day. There are women in this country who are wondering how they are going to feed or diaper their children from day to day. There are children who need medical attention that their parents may not be able to afford. Anyone who has ever had to worry about such things can deeply sympathize. For those of us who have escaped such worries, we can only imagine the level of instinctive stress that uncertainty can provoke.

There are many ways to celebrate Mother's Day, but here are a few unconventional suggestions that will prove to your own mother that she did a good job raising you. How about dropping off a box of diapers and/or a case of formula to a local food bank or women's shelter? If you have some baby furniture or clothing that your own children have outgrown, how about donating that stuff to a local charity? Does our local hospital have a fund for children who need care? Are there doctors in our community or city who volunteer in clinics overseas who might need supplies? There are countless ways to help support Moms locally and globally. Let your own Mom know that you were thinking about her and all of the many things she provided for you along the way...and that you did a good deed in honor of her. It will make her proud.