

## “Following the Good Shepherd”

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30 (May 8, 2022)

by Paul Matheson



Earlier this week a funeral service was held for a Canadian hockey legend, Guy Lafleur. I remember watching Guy play, and maybe some of you do too. I can see him streaking down the ice, with his hair flying – he didn’t wear a helmet. They called him the Flying Frenchman, or the Blond Demon, or simply the Flower, which is a literal translation of his name. Lafleur was a great player, the all-time leading points scorer for the Montreal Canadiens, and instrumental in a string of Stanley Cup wins for the team. He was always a fan favourite.

Of course it’s one thing to *watch* someone play the game, and another thing to *actually* play it. On one hand you have the arm-chair fans, the ones in the stands, or those who relax in the warm comfort of their home and watch the game unfold before them on a screen. (Which is most of us perhaps.) And on the other hand, you have the folks who are out there playing, getting bumped and bruised, feeling exhausted, but also exhilarated.

If you really want to know the magic of the game, you have to play it. Lafleur said that’s all he ever really wanted to do – play the game! And the importance of being *in* the game is what we find in our gospel reading today. That may not be immediately apparent, but hopefully it will become clear as we go forward.



Our story begins with Jesus in Jerusalem. It’s a great feast, celebrating the dedication of the Temple. And there, in the portico of Solomon, some of the Jews gather round him.

“How long will you keep us in suspense,” they ask? “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” They want to know who Jesus is. No more beating around the bush. Just say it: yes or no! Are you the Messiah, the one we’ve all been waiting for, or not? Did they *really* want to know? Or were they trying to force Jesus into saying something that would get him into trouble?

I must admit, there are times I too would like Jesus to speak more plainly. “Just say it, Lord. Just tell me. Answer my question. Make it clear and plain and simple.” But things of faith are not always simple, are they? The great questions in life, the mysteries of the universe, the things that matter most to us can not always be reduced to an easy answer. Maybe that’s why Jesus taught in parables. And why he loved to tell stories. Why he sometimes even seemed to talk in riddles. He wants us to think carefully and deeply about the way things are in the realm of God.



Who are you Jesus? We want to know? “But I’ve told you,” he answered, “and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.” In other words, if you won’t listen to what I *say*, then look at what I *do*. They’ll show you who I am. It’s a good general principle, isn’t it? It’s easy to persuade with smooth-sounding words. But the way to really know who a person is, and what they’re all about, is by observing how they live in their ordinary, every day lives.

So what characterized Jesus' life? Things like generosity, forgiveness, truth-telling, prayer, friendship, love, kindness. Think of all the stories we have about him in the gospels: healing, feeding, caring, welcoming. Think of those miraculous stories of great abundance, of evil spirits cast aside, of restoration and new life.

Once, his cousin John sent messengers asking if Jesus was the One to come or should they wait for another. Jesus answered: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." There's no difference between the *words* of Jesus and the *works* of Jesus. Here's one who "walks the talk" we might say.



OK, fair enough. But the group that encircles him in the temple court – they aren't paying any attention to that. "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe." It's there, right in front of you. But you're not seeing it! And the reason why? "Because you do not belong to my sheep." says Jesus. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

There's a huge difference between the crowd of Jews who question Jesus in the portico of Solomon, and the group of Jews who have answered the call, and become his disciples. One group knows Jesus only by reputation. They've spent no time with him, no energy in getting to know him. The other group, the ones who are disciples, have actually lived with Jesus. They've heard his words, they've seen his works. They know who Jesus is. The first group have *no* relationship with Jesus. They're accosting him on a whim. The second group have a *deep* relationship with Jesus. And they're getting to know him better day by day.



So now, before I forget, let me come back to Guy Lafleur. Guy lived to play the game. And when it comes to knowing who Jesus is, you have to be *in* the game. Disciples of Jesus are more than casual observers. They don't just sit back in their easy chairs and critique.



There are two things I want to say to you about getting to know Jesus. One is the importance of *belonging*. And the other is the importance of *following*.

Belonging first. Let me share some of my own story. I grew up in a Christian home, and credit that experience for planting the seeds of faith within me. I realize that not everyone comes to Christ this way. There are many ways for us to encounter the gospel throughout our lives. But for me, it started with a family who put Christian life and practice at the centre of our home.

Today is Mother's Day, and I want to acknowledge my mother's influence in my life. I remember her tucking me in at night, reading Bible stories, and teaching me to pray. As I grew older, I saw the way that faith was real to her and how it influenced the way she lived. Maybe that's true for some of you as well. My parents brought me to Sunday School and church. So they introduced me to a faith community that would have a profound effect on my life. There I learned how to read the Bible. I learned songs and prayers and was given a language we use to speak of a God who is present and active in our lives.



In New Testament Christianity, there's no such thing as individual believers living by themselves. There are disciples who walk *together* with Jesus and strive to learn his kingdom way. And the whole idea of that kingdom way involves relationship – with God and neighbour. We are baptized, every one of us, into the body of Christ, a *corporate* expression of faith, a body with many members. So, to be a Christian is, by definition, a communal practice. Before we believe, before we follow, before we fully understand, we belong. And in that belonging, we learn and grow.

The writer, Diana Butler Bass, points out that we sometimes have this order mixed up. “Instead of believing, behaving, belonging,” she says, “we need to reverse the order to belonging, behaving, and believing. Jesus did not begin with questions of belief. Jesus’ public ministry started when he formed a community.”<sup>1</sup>

So we invite people into our community. We welcome them, help them to feel that they are part of us. Teach them our practices and encourage them to participate. And then, as they become more familiar with our way of life, they may come to a place where they profess faith. We grow into faith. Over time, it becomes part of who we are. As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

In his book, “The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach The West ... Again,” George Hunter suggests that we follow this practice, focussing on hospitality. He recognizes that our worldview is socially conditioned, shaped by the community we are part of.<sup>2</sup>

Now I realize that for some, the church might actually be a barrier to faith. But Christianity is an *incarnational* faith. Just as God took on our human flesh and blood in the person of Jesus, so God continues to live and act within the very human community of the church. Of course we are flawed and have many shortcomings. But that is the miracle of grace: that God has chosen to make God’s presence known among us.

The reason you don’t believe, says Jesus in this morning’s Gospel reading, is because you’re not part of my sheep. You’re not part of the flock I shepherd. How can you ever know who I am if you’re not with me?



So, *belonging*. And the second thing I want to mention is *following*. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. “My sheep hear my voice. They follow me.” Do you remember back at the beginning of the Gospel of John, when Jesus called his first disciples? They had so many questions. Jesus invited them to “come and see.” (John 1:39) Come and see where I live and what I’m all about.

So they did. They became his followers and invited others to do the same. (John 1:46) It’s in *following* that we get to know who Jesus is. This is true, not only for those first disciples, but for us. It’s the difference between talking about Jesus, and talking with him. The difference between a discussion about religion, and an intimate

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, Harper One, pp. 11-64, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach The West ... Again*, Abingdon Press, pp. 99-100, 2000.

conversation with God, which is prayer. It's the difference between thinking about the mere possibility of faith and actually living that faith – by stepping out, trusting.

You see the difference? You can't get to know Jesus by standing apart, gazing at him from a distance. Faith is an active thing that involves our commitment, a decision to move. It's risky business. But it's the only way. We grow in faith by learning to *trust*, enough to take a step forward. And then another. And another after that. And as we do, we get to know the goodness of God, the love of God that will never let us go.

You cannot grow in faith without following. You cannot learn to pray without doing it – through good times and bad times. You cannot learn to read scripture faithfully without sitting with it, and studying it, and wrestling with it – especially the parts that are hard to understand and difficult to apply. We learn by *following*. And that is what separates the disciples of Jesus from those who demand a quick and easy answer.



If Jesus had answered those critics “plainly” as they desired, I wonder, would it make any difference? If he'd said “yes, I am the Messiah” would they have been likely to receive him? I doubt it. Because “yes” to *their* idea of Messiah was so different to what Jesus meant. What they wanted was a simple formula, an easy answer to their pre-conceived notions. What Jesus offered was a way of belonging and following that would radically transform their lives.

“You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” What an amazing set of promises!

St. Augustine, the fourth century North African bishop, spoke about “faith seeking understanding.” He meant that disciples of Jesus are invited into a life of faith and trust. We stand in a relationship with Christ. And from that stance, we enter a journey of learning and growing, of understanding and obeying, of living and loving. And this journey is ongoing, a great adventure that lasts until the day we die.

You cannot know who Jesus is unless you're in the game. Guy Lafleur was a great hockey player. But there's a bigger game in life than that! And a whole multitude who are part of the flock that Jesus shepherds. Do you count yourself among them? I pray it may be so. Amen.