

## ***Following One You Trust***

**John 10:1-14**

Last weekend I found Jesus. Actually, I'd found Jesus in my youth when my faith began to take root to give me direction for my life, years before I sensed the call to pastoral ministry. But every once in a while, I have an experience that confirms both my calling and, more importantly, my faith.

As you know, I attended the Alliance of Baptists Annual Gathering, which was held this year at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. I've attended many Alliance gatherings over the years, but this one reached me in a way many don't. For one thing, the Alliance was celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an organization of those who, originally, were kicked out of the Southern Baptist Convention, after Fundamentalists took control in the early 1980s. Over the years, they've added a number of other Baptist types (American Baptists, Canadian Baptists, Cooperative Baptists, Progressive National Baptists, some UCC, Mennonites, and a few others) as denominational politics around human sexuality, gender equality in the church, and the nature of missions itself forced individuals and congregations to find new (and safer) places to practice their faith with dignity. That is one of the reasons we joined the Alliance seven years ago.

The lineup of speakers at this conference was impressive: Dr. William Barber (considered by many to be our generation's Martin Luther King Jr.), Naomi Tutu (daughter of the late Desmond Tutu), Allyson Robinson (the first openly transgender Baptist pastor), to name a few. The makeup of the nearly 500 attendees ranged across the spectrum—racially, theologically, socially, economically. There were gay and straight, aging Baby-Boomers and young Millennials, children and adults, peace advocates along with

military chaplains, black social activists addressing racism and 80-year-old grandmothers standing up for undocumented farm workers, people from “Old-time Gospel-ly” churches to those representing radically creative and innovative congregations—a range of humanity all together to give voice to their concerns that are part and parcel of their lives, perspectives, and the witness of their faith.

Throughout the day on Friday, Dr. Barber in his inimitable way ushered us all to heaven and back (as great black preaching will), summed up in his compelling call for a “political Pentecost” in this country—one that speaks the language and to the needs of everyone, not just the affluent and powerful. On Saturday morning we gathered in worship, exploring the deeper meanings of “home” and “partnership” and “justice”—all of which are very relevant to our faith in God and in each other. As we began the day for workshops and training, the prayers and liturgy included a moment when we sang in chorus the old African-American spiritual, “Give Me Jesus.” It was a song Wendy and I brought to the early service on Easter, so it was intimately familiar to my own heart and soul.

In the morning when I rise, in the morning when I rise,  
In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus.

This amazing chorus of voices sang lovingly and personally of the one who was the bedrock of their lives—the author of their faith—their Great Redeemer and hope—this beloved one named, Jesus. What each person brought to the table, whatever experiences in life were known and unknown, whatever wounds and scars had blemished anyone’s sense of self or place in Christian community, whatever Jesus meant to anyone there, in that blessed moment everything seemed healed and everyone was well.

Give me Jesus, give me Jesus,  
You may have all the rest, give me Jesus.

For a very good reason, it felt as if in that moment, we had all found Jesus. Jesus meant something very dear and important to each one there, even though our life experiences and interests were often quite distinct and varied. Jesus was the one who brought and bound us all together.

For all of its problems, organized religion has a way of doing that, especially when the right spirit is cultivated. Private spirituality, which many nowadays claim is their faith (“I’m not religious, I’m spiritual”), doesn’t do that as well, because it is often more self-focused, so inward looking and personally directed. Those who avoid organized religion tend to supplant something that is larger than themselves with something that is tailored more to their own personal likes and interests. Certainly, everyone is free to do that, but it may not deliver them from their own self-centeredness, ego needs, or moral limitations. Private spirituality doesn’t demand a focus much beyond the individual. Religious traditions, however, at least direct us outward in service and into community with others, where someone other than ourselves lies at the center of our moral consciousness. This is the primary orientation for our own faith, as we are led to an understanding of God in the person and teachings of Jesus and through service to others.

When you consider something as diverse as the global church, it’s amazing that, somehow, we have found ways to be united in faith. We’ve done that by following Jesus. What does that mean? Ultimately, it has to do with trust; you allow your life to be shaped by his example, his teachings, as well as the experience of being led in spirit by those who share that same faith. It doesn’t mean there’s unanimity or agreement on what Jesus means, or what he represents, or who reflects his presence most or where his teachings apply; but it does mean, if we are sincere about it, we’ll

respond with an open heart to follow him. In some way, his word will speak to our hearts and on balance we'll trust what he said is true.

Give me Jesus, give me Jesus,  
You may have all the rest, give me Jesus.

This sense of “following Jesus” permeates the New Testament, as we might expect. But it's more pronounced in the Gospels than anywhere else. Obviously, it's because Jesus of Nazareth lies at the heart of the stories and, as far as his disciples were concerned, they literally followed him, physically as he moved around Galilee and Judea, and spiritually long after he left them. It's not surprising, I suppose, that each Gospel writer conveyed this sense of following in their own ways.

For Mark, influenced by the Apostle Peter in a time of rising Roman persecution, following Jesus led to the cross. That sense of Jesus was somewhat different than for Luke, who had been with Paul working among a Gentile population, where following Jesus meant to be delivered from society's margins and the imperial order of his day, manifested in a redeemed and Spirit-filled new humanity. Then there was Matthew, whose audience was mainly Jewish in Antioch and around the eastern Mediterranean region; in his Gospel, following Jesus meant bringing about the new and coming realm of God—the long-promised redemption of Israel. Each writer and community presented Jesus in the way they did and those who followed found meaning in him in like manner.

Decades later, John's Gospel came into being, long after any of Jesus' contemporaries lived. So, with no eyewitnesses to his earthly life, who was Jesus and what did he represent? The Gospel writer was less interested in telling the actual human story of Jesus' life, as much as he was conveying the meaning of Jesus as divine revelation. This accounts for why John's

story of Jesus is largely symbolic, often metaphorical, more than a historical narrative. This is apparent even in the opening line: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Following Jesus was finding the truth of God in the eternal Christ, the mysterious presence of the living God in Jesus.

In our text for today, what the writer seems to have done is conflate a number of metaphors and sayings of Jesus that had been passed down through the decades, while making a direct tie between who Jesus was with the far more ancient reference to God in Hebrew literature, i.e., a good shepherd. In these verses, Jesus is represented as the shepherd, as well as the gate to the sheep pen, and as the gatekeeper—presumably, three images that Jesus (or his disciples) used in relation to his role and leadership among his followers. Each one presents a slightly different sense of the relationship one would have in following Jesus.

The imagery in these verses came from ordinary life. Let me explain. Shepherds were typically found in nomadic tribes or later on small farms, or by Jesus’ time, as notoriously less reliable hired hands working for wealthy landowners who raised sheep. Though it wasn’t a particularly prized occupation, it was a given that there was a close and caring relationship between a shepherd and sheep, which is why it worked well as religious imagery.

For their protection, shepherds would usher all of their sheep into a sheepfold at night—most often a pen or paddock constructed of stones topped by brambles, adjacent to the owner’s house, where one of the shepherds would keep watch overnight, sitting in the entrance of the pen, guarding against access or escape. So, literally, a shepherd would be a gate or gatekeeper so the sheep could safely rest. In the morning, each shepherd

would come and, using his own unique call or whistle, would gather the sheep for which he was responsible from the sheepfold, separating sheep from sheep or sheep from goats. The sheep would follow the one they knew by the sound of his voice, who would lead them out to pasture or to water throughout the day, watching over them and protecting them from wild predators or thieves, who would steal them for food or to sell. Since sheep have no natural defenses, they are completely vulnerable to the threats from the world around them, apart from the protection of a good and responsible shepherd.

One can understand why this pastoral relationship became a biblical symbol for faith in a loving, protective God, as well as why human beings are often in search for those they can implicitly trust to guide them through life. We are like sheep that can go astray, each to our own way, without the rod and staff of the good shepherd, as both the prophet and Psalmist noted.

The use of it here in John underscores the ties between a sense of safety and the biblical notion of “salvation.” Namely, “salvation” is when one gains a sense of safety from that which threatens their existence or their welfare.

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The purpose of the shepherd is to enhance the life of the sheep, so they may grow and develop to their intended best—that they may have life as abundantly as possible. “Safety” and “salvation” had a distinctly this-world notion to then—not just some eternal hope beyond death (as we usually interpret it), which is one reason John’s story of Lazarus has him raised from the tomb back into this life, instead of eternity. Lazarus’ name means,

“he whom God helps” referring most directly to those most vulnerable in life.

One important aspect of the journey of faith for any of us, regardless of our station in life, is in sensing the way that Jesus does that for us. We all have our experiences and settings where we fell quite vulnerable, if not afraid. That yearning for safety could come in the form of a prayer for wellbeing from harm or illness; it could be for a place of protection from those who attack or persecute you. A sense of safety could be freedom from someone or something that enslaves you.

Safety could be the wisdom we glean from Jesus’ teachings to face the challenges of life, or to address the powers that bring evil and injustice into this world. It could be by sheltering with the community that identifies with you, recognizing your value, while protecting your dignity and presence, especially when other’s won’t.

If not safety, we may find meaning in Jesus by the sense of moral discipline that gets us back on track—back on the right path—or in the encouraging shove to move forward down the road to a better place. Often, it is through the guidance we gain in handling situations where we trust that the course we choose is the right one for the moment. There are as many reasons to find meaning in Jesus as a shepherd and guide to our lives as there are needs and circumstances in the living of human life.

I pondered this in looking back at that special moment when the collection of humanity present at the Alliance Annual Gathering joined together to sing such a simple, but amazingly powerful, chorus (“Give me Jesus, give me Jesus...”). What did Jesus mean to each one? In what way was this a meaningful relationship or center of each one’s spirituality?

What, for example, does it mean to a black preacher like Barber, who has taken on the mantle of social justice with the same courage and spirit as Dr. King, tirelessly traveling around the country to support the disenfranchised, even though he's physically crippled with spondylitis? What does Jesus mean to Allyson Robinson, who has faced so much vitriol and hatred directed at her from other Christians, even while finding deep peace in knowing who she truly is through her journey from the sexual orientation of her body to the one of her heart and soul? What does Jesus mean to peace activists standing shoulder to shoulder with military chaplains, who represent Jesus among those trained to go to war? What does Jesus mean to aging Boomers and is it different than what he means to youthful Millennials? Across the spectrum of beliefs, politics, race, gender, and social and economic location—why is it we can all find a source of meaning, a deeply personal tie, to Jesus of Nazareth?

There are no universally-affirmed reasons for why that is, but there's a simple spiritual that expresses it well. We follow Jesus—the one we love, the one we trust—the one who brings us to safety and to abundant life. Whatever he means to any of us, it's enough to bring us to our knees and joy to our hearts, standing side by side with those who feel the same. It is a beautiful sight and, more importantly, it expresses a great hope of heaven.

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