

GOING AFTER JESUS

JOHN 12:9-19

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I have an article that has been sitting on the corner of my desk for probably three months now.

(This is a common practice of mine when I come across a piece of writing that I think that I might one day want to explore further. I leave it on my desk and allow other things to pile up on top of it until I get fed up with the state of my desk and do some cleaning and then rediscover it just in time to use it in a sermon! It's a very precise system. 😊)

We talked about this article a few months ago in our Sunday School class. It's from a May 2017 issue of the *Canadian Mennonite* and is written by a mother discussing the faith journey of her young adult son.

It's called "A big fan of Jesus... the church not so much."

I remember my reaction the first time I saw the headline and read the article. It left a bad taste in my mouth.

Another article about young adults who can't be bothered to commit to the church, who are happy to jump all over its faults, another uncomfortable reminder of a demographic that is obviously lacking from many churches, ours included.

Now, as the parent of soon-to-be young adults, I want to be clear that I understand how personal an article like this. In a culture where faith is *far* from assumed and where our kids are bombarded with endless messages about how they can (must) define reality for

themselves, we *want* our kids to retain some kind of a connection to Christian faith, even if it is a tenuous one.

I know that there are many parents out there (and in here) who would be delighted if their young adult kids would call themselves fans of Jesus, no matter what they think of the church.

But still. The headline bothered me. It expressed sentiments that I hear often, and not just from young adults.

*Oh, I have no problem with Jesus... I like Jesus... I think Jesus is pretty cool... But the church is full of judgmental, hypocritical people... The church is boring... The church is too dogmatic... The church doesn't address what I think is important... But like I said, I'm a **fan** of Jesus...*

These people often love to quote Gandhi to me: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

All in all, it's a simple (and convenient) formula: Jesus = good; the church = bad.

And whenever I encounter these sentiments, I am left wondering how much this person actually knows about this Jesus that they claim to be a "fan" of? Or about the church, for that matter (but that's another sermon).

The *CM* article had this to say about Aaron, the young adult who was its subject:

Aaron's not sure if he really believes in God and says he's never experienced God's presence or profound answers to prayer. Still, he's a big fan of Jesus. He loves Jesus' teachings and the way he interacted with people.

"Maybe if could all just live like Jesus taught—love your neighbour, don't steal, don't lie, don't be a jerk—I think the whole world would just be a better place.¹

This is true. If we could all live like Jesus taught, the world *would* be a better place.

¹ <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/big-fan-jesus-church-not-so-much>

But the thing is, Jesus had a little bit more to say than telling us to not be jerks (although I'm sure he would be very pleased if we were not jerks).

Jesus also says hard things about heaven and hell and the cost of discipleship, about lust and anger and the corruption of the human heart. He talks about "hating" our earthly lives that we might gain eternal life.

Jesus certainly interacted with people in inspiring and compassionate ways (we might think of the woman caught in adultery or the "sinful woman" who anointed him with perfume). But He also called a Canaanite woman who came to him for help with her daughter a dog and called Peter "Satan."

There are ways that we can make sense of why Jesus interacted with what seem like pretty harsh ways, but we dare not avoid the Jesus who confronts, challenges, and rebukes.

We can't just take the bits of Jesus' teaching that we prefer. We can't separate his teaching from the events of Holy Week. And we *certainly* can't avoid the fact that the same Jesus who taught inspiring things had an unshakeable conviction that God exists and that God would accomplishing his purposes for the world through Jesus and then his church.

If we're going to say that we're "big fans" of Jesus, we need to look at Jesus as he is, not as we would prefer that he was.

Well, speaking of "fans of Jesus," there were a lot of them loitering around Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Jesus' reputation has preceded him. His public ministry has turned him into a person of significant interest, both to his admirers and to his enemies.

Everyone is watching as he enters the city. We know the story. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. The people wave their palm branches and cry, "Hosanna!" in anticipation of a coming king.

The people in Jesus' day knew what they wanted from God and from God's anointed one. They wanted a mighty king to rule from Jerusalem. They wanted the Romans out

and a Jewish king in. They wanted punishment for their enemies—all those who had held their boots over their necks for long years. They wanted a righteous king and the fulfillment of all they had hoped for.

Well, we know that this isn't exactly what they will get. N.T. Wright has said that Palm Sunday is “an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God's answer.”²

As I was reading this passage this week, I noticed something different about John's version of Jesus' triumphal entry.

John's version of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the shortest of the four gospels. It's also the only one that is bracketed by mention of Lazarus (I extended the reading to include these portions).

In the verses immediately preceding Jesus' entry, we read:

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Bringing someone back from the dead is the kind of thing that will get you a lot of fans in a real hurry!

And the raising of Lazarus is a game changer in John's gospel. After this that the Jewish leaders intensify their plot to kill Jesus. No would-be-Messiah or populist rabbi had ever done anything like this before. It was drawing enormous crowds and making Jesus immensely popular.

The Pharisees realize that this Jesus is becoming a threat they can no longer contain. We see this in John 11:47-48:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. **If we let him go on like**

² N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 69.

this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.

They repeated this on that first Palm Sunday. Faced with the adoring crowds, there for the spectacle of Jesus and Lazarus, the Pharisees grumble,

You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!

So we have the religious elites bemoaning Jesus' popularity and plotting his downfall, you have an expectant crowd hungry for this worker of miracles, perhaps looking for a show.

So what does Jesus do for his "fans?"

He subverts the narrative. He engages in a prophetic (and perhaps slightly comedic) bit of "street theatre" to mock the power of Rome and to remind his "fans" of who he really was.

Sidling into Jerusalem on the back of a pitiful little donkey was meant to provide a stark contrast to the procession of a "real" king.

One commentator described what a typical triumphant entry of a king would have looked like:

"A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."³

This is the background against which we need to frame the Triumphal Entry of Jesus.

As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. His

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1708>

was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, and the explicitly vulnerable.⁴

Jesus is offering a powerful critique to Rome, to power, to business as usual, to the way power is sought and used and abused and lorded over others (Matthew 20:20-28).

He is enacting his own words: “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As we will see five days from now, he’s also kind of alienating his fans.

Raising Lazarus from the dead, turning water into wine, healing, ticking off the elites, making fun of Rome... these things are all pretty cool. The fans cheer!

But the cheering won’t last long.

I suspect that even on Palm Sunday, some of Jesus’ fans were chuckling along with his ridiculous entry on a donkey but also secretly thinking, “Ok, Jesus, nice joke... we get it... But let’s get on with the “mighty king” business, shall we?”

The world had, indeed, gone after Jesus. But five days later, many of the fans would be gone. After Jesus got himself executed. Fans are fickle like that.

I want to return to the Pharisees’ complaint in John 12:19: “Look, the world has gone after him!”

The question I would like to put to us on this Palm Sunday, 2018 is a simple one: How will we “go after” Jesus?

Will we go after him like the spectacle hungry crowds that saw Jesus and Lazarus as something like celebrities on a victory tour, but that dissipated once he went the way of suffering? Will we pick and choose the parts of Jesus that we like, the parts that confirm our expectations and justify our view of how God is supposed to operate? Will we fashion a Jesus in our own image?

⁴ Ibid.

Or will we take up our cross and follow Jesus on a road that involves suffering? Will we recognize that Jesus comes not just to teach us inspiring things but difficult things? Will we embrace a “foolish God” who is in Christ reconciling all things to himself?

Will we repent and turn away from the Jesus we might prefer and turn toward the only one who will save us?

Will we be fans? Or followers?

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that the life of faith is simple or binary or like a light switch where we’re either on or off when it comes to our posture toward Jesus.

It sounds cliché, but the life of faith really *is* a journey. Many who start as fans of Jesus become followers (and, tragically, vice versa) and that these movements take place in various ways over periods of time in our journey of faith.

I think that even those of us who have been trying to follow Jesus for many years are always on the journey from fans to followers. We never really arrive at the destination on this side of eternity.

Jesus will always have time for the curious, the seekers, the not-yet-convinced, the stumblers and the failures. God takes us wherever we are and nudges us onward. So I have plenty of hope for Jesus’ fans. 😊 I have to, because I am one.

But our curiosity must be honest. We must face Jesus as he is, not as we wish he was or as it is convenient for him to be. We must not remake Jesus in our own image.

This was what Jesus fans on Palm Sunday did.

They craved a militaristic king who would lay waste to their enemies and set up his kingdom in Jerusalem. They had seen what Jesus could do in raising Lazarus from the dead. Surely nothing would be impossible for this king! They had Jesus’ entire agenda laid out for him and it certainly didn’t include a cross!

And we still remake Jesus in our image today. We don’t have conquering heroes kings on warhorses in mind, at least not usually. We turn Jesus into a good teacher who tells us not to be jerks, who likes peace and justice (as we define these words).

We turn Jesus into an inspiring example of compassion who we can be “fans” of without bothering with the church that he instituted, the community that he called his body, the arena within which he intends to train us in love, the church that he promised the gates of hell would not prevail against.

So, how will we go after Jesus into this Holy Week (and beyond)?

Will we go after him like fans eager to be impressed and curious about the show?

Or will we go after him as those who are convinced that his radical rearrangement of the world really is good news—the best news the world has ever seen?

Amen.

