

One Flock, One Shepherd

John 10:11-18

Springridge Mennonite Church (Joint Service in Pincher Creek)

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I like questions.

I like *asking* questions. I have always been a very theologically curious person. What is the truth of the matter, the meaning of life, the grounding of morality, etc.? Why do we believe that? Is it consistent with other belief x or y? If I believe this, what does it commit me to over here?

I like engaging with the questions of others. This has been a kind of default strategy for me in my ministry for quite a while.

Each year our church devotes a sermon series to responding to the questions of people in the congregation.

Naomi and I lead a young adults' group and each time we gather the conversation is based on a question submitted by someone in the group.

I serve as a chaplain at the jail in Lethbridge. Sometimes, if I don't know what to do on a given week, I'll just open it up to the guys around the circle and say, "What's on your mind?"

I like hearing what other people are thinking, where they are starting from in their pursuit of God, what they find troubling or puzzling or whatever.

I don't ever want to be preaching to a congregation of one (namely, myself). I'm well aware that among the occupational hazards of this role is assuming that my questions and approaches to faith and to Scripture are shared by everyone I am speaking to.

I'm going to orient my sermon this morning around a cluster of questions that I've been hearing a lot and thinking about a lot over at least the last decade or so. And then I'm going

to circle back to our passage from John and see what it might have to say to us in the context of all these questions.

Speaking of questions... In talking with Tany about this service, she mentioned that you've been discussing the question of why people leave the church. That's a big one!

As it happens, I recently asked the young adults group a similar question. Why do young people leave the church (or just not bother in the first place).

I had read an article the day of our meeting about why young people aren't coming to church and the author had this crazy suggestion that we could, you know, *ask* them.

So, I did. Here's some of what I heard:

- fear of judgment, won't be accepted
- I worry that I can't be forgiven – I'm too far gone
- in the age of the internet and social media, there are just so many other options out there
- church is old-fashioned – I can't see connection between old stories and our time; some of the songs, etc. don't connect
- young people are too individualistic – Christianity is inconvenient, doesn't fit the "you do you" philosophy of our time
- we have a short attention span
- no joy, worship services too often feel like funerals
- feels too passive... one way services, want more interaction
- there's an absence of grace
- a prioritization of issues over people
- perfection expected... fear of not knowing, seeming dumb
- hypocrisy of people
- too much politics, not enough bible
- no space to be vulnerable
- the judgmentalism of Christian history
- God feels impersonal... hard to have faith in someone who doesn't talk back

That's a pretty interesting set of responses! Many did not surprise me, but a few did.

I expected to hear about hypocrisy and judgmentalism, about a lack of grace. I expected to hear frustration with certain styles of music or format of services.

I was surprised to hear the frank acknowledgment of the default individualism of our time, of how the church can be an inconvenient reminder that the self just might not belong in the center. I didn't expect to hear a recognition and a frustration that the Internet and social media have whittled away our attention spans.

And then of course there's the deep, personal stuff. A longing for a space to be vulnerable. A fear that we can't be forgiven. A hunger for grace.

The whole conversation with the young adults group gestured in the direction of a broader question that I've thought about off and on pretty much for my entire Christian life.

Does the church have a PR problem? Are we presenting a bad image to the world? Is the reason people aren't coming to church (young or old or anywhere in between) because of, well, *us*?

In a blog post a while back, psychologist Richard Beck, from Abilene Christian University in Texas, shared something that he said to his students in a lecture last semester:

I hope for the day where, when the world sees Christians coming, they say, 'The Christians are here! Yay! I love those people!'

This intuitively feels like the sort of thing that we ought to hope for.

We likely all have some experience of Christians behaving in ways that turn people off.

We've heard a few already. You could probably add to the list.

If I had a dollar for every time that I heard someone complain about something Christians have said or done, I would have... a lot of dollars.

And, leaving aside the sins (real or imagined) of Christianity, I think there is the basic reality that most of us just want to be liked. I don't imagine many of us relish the feeling of being thought of as weird or out of touch or credulous or naïve or whatever.

Yeah, we might believe an odd thing or two, but we're basically the same as you!

This was what the evangelical subculture of my youth laboured to convey, slavishly trying to imitate the culture around it, only in a slightly more Jesus-y way.

We're cool, really! We want you to like us, and we have a whole bunch of products to sell you to prove it!

It's probably also at least part of what's going on in the more politically active progressive wings of the church as well. *Hey, we're smart and socially engaged and sophisticated, we have all the right opinions on all the right issues, if only in a slightly more Jesus-y way.*

We all want someone to say of us, "Yay, I love those people!"

But should this be something we aspire to? One of Beck's colleagues at Abilene Christian, Brad East, gently pushed back a bit in a follow up post.

East argued that it's not actually clear that "the world *should* see the church and love, welcome, and celebrate her presence."

He offers a few reasons for this.

The Christian message of self-renunciation is likely going to seem more offensive than admirable to those who aren't keen on dislodging themselves from the centre.

The church is full of sinners and sinners aren't particularly attractive.

Jesus wasn't attractive to many people. He elicited admiration, awe, and worship for some, to be sure, but he made a lot of people pretty angry.

Put bluntly, the world—at least many people—did not see Jesus coming and say, "Yay, I love that guy!" They said, "We have no king but Caesar, so you can go ahead and crucify that guy!"

I think Brad East offers a necessary counterpoint to what Beck said to his students in that lecture. I don't necessarily think Christians should long for a day when we are loved and admired by the world around us.

Indeed, we should probably be suspicious should this ever come about. Does not Jesus himself say, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18)?

Did not the people in the verses immediately following our good shepherd passage today say:

‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’ (John 10:20).

(Interesting where the lectionary cuts that passage off. 😊)

Then and now, not everyone who sees or hears Jesus coming says, “Yay, I love that guy.”

And yet... Jesus was and is the love of God expressed in human form. This I believe. So, how could the love of God push people away? Is not love always attractive? How could Jesus provoke the hatred of the world?

Well, he had this habit of telling those who were convinced they saw clearly that they were blind, those who thought they heard accurately that they were deaf, those who thought they were healthy that they were actually sick and in need of a physician.

He talked far too much about sin to be universally admired.

Now, this isn't to say that the church needs to roll up its sleeves and start condemning sin more enthusiastically. We've kind of been there and done that.

We've ably demonstrated that we're pretty lousy judges and this should probably be left up to God.

But at the very least we must be honest that we are, indeed, all sinners. This idea that we're all perfect just the way we are and that the task of those around us is mostly just to relentlessly affirm us could hardly be less Christian.

Jesus consistently paid people the immense compliment of telling them the twin truths that they were deeply and perfectly loved by God and that they were sinners in need of mercy.

Some people love this message, and some hate it.

But in my experience, it tends to be those who know the extent of their weakness and their need who are the most likely to see Jesus coming and say, “Yay.”

Over the last ten months or so, I’ve been watching a show called The Chosen with the guys in jail. In a recent episode Jesus heals a paralytic who some enterprising friends lower through the roof of a house.

The order of operations is interesting in this story. He first says to the man on the mat, “Your sins are forgiven” (this would surely be seen as victim-blaming or shaming today).

And then, as if to ratify the forgiveness and legitimate his ability to pronounce it, he appends, “Get up. Take your bed and go to your home.”

The truth. The mercy. Together, they revealed the love of God.

It was fascinating to watch the guys watch this scene. You could have heard a pin drop. A bunch of them leaned forward on their knees as the story reached its climactic moment. One of them started clapping and cheering when the man stood up and walked. A few wiped a tear or two away.

It was a beautiful reminder for me that there are moments when the real Jesus in the fullness of who he is actually reaches us.

I think each one of us longs for the truth, even when it isn’t convenient, even when it exposes our sin. I think each one of us longs for mercy, to be forgiven.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says in our gospel text today. What makes this shepherd good?

Well, he lays down his life for the sheep. That’s a pretty big one. Jesus is almost certainly pointing ahead to the cross here, the decisive example of how far the shepherd would go for his sheep.

But I wonder if he’s also referring to his general way of being in the world. Jesus led and modeled a self-emptying, self-denying life (interestingly, the Greek word translated “good”

in the phrase “good shepherd” could also be rendered “model” — as in, “I am the model shepherd...”).

So, self-sacrifice is one thing that makes the good shepherd “good.”

But this week, I was also drawn to verse 14:

I know my own and my own know me.

To know and to be known.

This is among the deepest human needs that any of us could ever have. It simultaneously draws and repels us. We want it but we are afraid of it.

This came through over and over again in the comments I got from the Young Adults when I asked them about the church.

- a desire for a place to be vulnerable
- a longing to be forgiven (and a fear that they couldn't)
- a recognition that a life oriented around the individual self doesn't work
- a search for a place to belong

The church is not perfect. I know this very well. But at its best, I think it is one of the few places that proclaims and embodies the truth that we are both broken and dearly loved, that we are incapable of saving ourselves and yet there is a mercy and a grace that goes beyond anything we can ask or imagine.

At its very best, the church simply points, again and again and again, to Jesus. Not to a theological system or a moral checklist or a political agenda. Not even to a denomination or a history.

I came across another interesting question recently in a conversation with Jen Otto. As you likely know, Jen and Greg served as Mennonite Church Canada Witness workers in Germany.

One of the questions that Jen said that a local pastor asked from time to time was this: “Does God still need Mennonites in Germany?”

Whew. That's another big one. It's maybe a bit of a threatening, even scary one. We could obviously substitute "Canada" for "Germany." And it's a question that, like the question I asked the young adults' group, kind of pokes at some deep insecurities.

We know that the Mennonite Church has been trending in the wrong direction demographically for some time and this doesn't feel good.

It's easy to ask questions like, *Why aren't people drawn to our worship, our vision of Jesus, our commitment to peace and justice? Why don't people like us? Why don't they see the Mennonites coming and say, "Yay, I love them?"*

Are we moving toward a post-denominational Christianity? Will Mennonites and Lutherans and Presbyterians and Pentecostals kind of just fade away or morph into a new non-denominational church?

Do efforts like the Jesus Collective represent the new reality that we should be leaning into?

(For those who don't know, Jesus Collective a North American-wide group that is trying to create a coalition of like-minded Jesus-centred churches across denominations. Many People are seeking a generous and post-denominational community committed to the way of Jesus. MCC Alberta has done some work with them. I attended one of their events last year in Vancouver and was largely impressed—I even encountered a few Mennonites there!)

Well, these are obviously massive, multilayered questions, and our time is getting short. I don't know the answer to this question of whether God still needs Mennonites in Canada.

I'm not even particularly comfortable speaking with any certainty about God "needing" us for anything. The God who made something from nothing surely does not strictly speaking *need* us for anything. God can do something wildly new at any moment, with or without us.

But God has chosen to involve human beings in the broad project of redemption and of the healing of the world.

And as long as this project remains uncompleted, I am convinced that God still seeks followers of Jesus in Canada. This, not "Mennonite" or any other denominational marker, should be our primary identity.

Another thing that struck me from our passage today. It's perhaps blindingly obvious, but shepherds lead, and sheep follow.

The sheep don't know the way. Left to their own devices, they'll just blunder off into all kinds of harmful directions. They must trust that the shepherd is leading them somewhere good.

And we can. Jesus is indeed the *good* shepherd. He is the shepherd who leads with truth and with mercy. He does not promise to lead us where we *want* to go, but he does promise to lead us where we *need* to go.

As he says in the verse immediately *before* today's reading: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

May this Jesus be the center of all that we are, all that we aspire to be and to do in the world.

May we seek always to know this Good Shepherd even as we are known, truly and completely by him.

Amen.

