

## **CAN I KNOW FOR SURE?**

*A sermon by Rev. Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.*

*Central United Methodist Church*

*April 25, 2010*

**(John 10:22-30)** At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, {23} and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. {24} So 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." {25} Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; {26} but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. {27} My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. {28} I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. {29} What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. {30} The Father and I are one."

## **WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW**

In the novel, *The Brothers K*, Author David James Duncan tells the story of the Chance family, a family of four boys, two girls, an agnostic father and a fundamentalist mother. Each member of the family has a different view of Jesus. As one of the boys, Kincaid, puts it:

*It's strange the way everybody has their own pet notion about Jesus, and nobody's pet notion seems to agree with anybody else's. Grandma, for instance, says He's 'just a defunct social reformer.' Then there's Papa, who once said He's God's Son all right, and that he survived the crucifixion just fine, but after the two-thousand-year-old funeral service his cockeyed followers called Christianity probably made Him sorry. Meanwhile, there's Freddie, who's six now, and who told me she saw Christ hiding under the bed one night . . . And Bet, who spent a whole day making a Christmas card for Uncle Marv and Aunt Mary Jane last year, then got so proud of the card that she refused to mail it to anybody but herself . . . Then we looked to see what she was so proud of, and it turned out to be this whole army of crayon angles, in these gold sort of football helmets, charging into Bethlehem while in the sky above the huge red and green letters*

*copied from a Christmas book Bet couldn't yet read proclaimed:  
'JOY TO THE WORLD! THE SAVIOR RESIGNS!'*<sup>1</sup>

Later in the novel, one of the children further complicates the subject:

*Personally I'm not sure just who or what Christ is. I still pray to Him in a pinch, but I talk to myself in a pinch too—and I'm getting less and less sure there's a difference . . . Mamma tried to clear up all the confusion by saying that Christ is exactly what the Bible says He is. But what does the Bible say He is? On one page He's a Word, on the next a bridegroom, then He's a boy, then a scapegoat, then a thief in the night; read on and He's the messiah, then oops, He's a rabbi, and then a fraction—a third of the Trinity—then a fisherman, then a broken loaf of bread. I guess even God, when he's human, has trouble deciding just what he is.*<sup>2</sup>

Who is Jesus and how can we know he is who he says he is? Jesus' detractors were asking the same question. They had had it with Jesus. Jesus seemed so evasive and ambiguous. Sometimes he was impossible to understand. At other times when they questioned him he said things like, *"I am the vine, you are the branches."* Or, *"I am bread, I am life, I am the way, I am the Good Shepherd."* Jesus' use of symbolism, metaphor and figurative speech was really getting under their skin. *"Give us a plain and simple answer,"* they seem to complain in the Gospel of John.

Jesus is just a frustrated with the Scribes and Pharisees. He's told them and shown them who he is but they haven't seen nor have they heard. Finally, Jesus draws a line in the sand. *"Listen,"* he seems to say, *"my sheep hear my voice and they follow me."* I'm sure this only serves to anger the authorities more. I can imagine one of the Pharisees shaking

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<sup>1</sup>David James Duncan, *The Brothers K* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1996), 61.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 58.

his head and saying, *“Here we go with the metaphorical, symbolic and figurative speech again.”* Soon afterwards, they start gathering up stones to kill Jesus.

In retrospect, Jesus seems to be rather clear in stating who he is. The problem seems to come in acceptance on the part of those who wish him to fit into their personal framework rather than allowing him to be who he is. As the pages of history have turned, I’m afraid we haven’t moved much from the position of these frustrated first century authorities. We have constructed some pretty bizarre and self-serving images of God’s son. I cannot help but think of a scene funny scene in the satirical comedy *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. However tasteless and ridiculous it might be, it speaks well to the sad reality of church history and of today’s religious landscape.

## CHAPEL AND SANCTUARY

In this particular scene, racing legend Ricky Bobby gathers his family—plus his father-in-law and best friend Carl—around the table and says grace for the food. *“Dear Lord Baby Jesus,”* he begins, *“or as our brothers to the south call you, Hey-Zeus, we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino’s, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell.”* He continues praying to *“Dear Lord Baby Jesus”* and *“Dear Tiny Infant Jesus,”* thanking him for *“my family, my beautiful two sons, Walker and Texas Ranger . . . and of course my red-hot, smokin’ wife.”* Ricky Bobby continues to pray, asking the Lord to use his *“Baby Jesus powers”* to heal his father-in-law. Finally, his wife interrupts: *“You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him Baby. It’s a bit odd and off-puttin’ to pray to a baby.”*

Ricky Bobby replies: *“Well, look, I like the Christmas Jesus best. When you say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.”* At this point, Carl pipes in with his preferences: *“I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt, ‘cause it says like, ‘I WANT TO BE FORMAL, BUT I’M HERE TO*

***PARTY TOO.'CAUSE I LIKE TO PARTY, SO I LIKE MY JESUS TO PARTY.' Then one of the boys says he likes to think of Jess as 'A NINJA FIGHTING OFF EVIL SAMURAI,' and Carl adds, 'I LIKE TO PICTURE JESUS WITH ANGEL WINGS, AND HE'S SINGING LEAD VOCALS FOR LYNYRD SKYNYRD, AND I'M IN THE FRONT ROW HAMMERED DRUNK.'***

Ricky Bobby finally returns to his prayer: *Dear eight-pound, six ounce newborn infant Jesus, you don't even know a word yet, just a little infant and so cuddly—but still omnipotent. We just thank you for all the races I've won and the \$21.2 million—Woo! Love that money!—that I've accrued over this past season.*

### **SETTING THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE ASIDE**

The truth of the matter is that we are all tempted to make Jesus into anything we like. We like a Jesus who (as author Ann Lamott has said) hates the people we hate and likes whatever we like. Brian McLaren says we all have our biases and we remake Jesus into whatever best suits our agenda. He writes,

*... We may unintentionally protect and uphold the white supremacist Jesus. The colonial Jesus, the Eurocentric Jesus, the Republican or Democratic Jesus, the capitalist or communist Jesus, the slave owning Jesus, the nuclear bomb-dropping America first Jesus, the organ-music stained-glass nostalgic-sentimental Jesus, the antiscience know-nothing simpleton Jesus, the prosperity gospel get rich quick Jesus, the institutional white shirt and tie Jesus, the Native American slaying genocidal Jesus, the cuddly omnipotent Christmas Jesus, the male chauvinist Jesus, the homophobic, 'God hates fags' Jesus, the south African pro-apartheid Jesus, the Joe Six pack Jesus, the anti-Semitic Nazi Jesus, the anti Muslim Crusader Jesus, and so on. Those who think they stand had better take heed lest they fall,*

*and those who think they know may have some more learning to do.*<sup>3</sup>

It is so easy to set the Gospel narrative aside, to entertain our own construct when it comes to Jesus especially when we imagine who and what he is for or against. We have a tendency to think that we are the ones who are starting from a higher ground. We have it right. Little do we think of actually reading the Jesus story and letting Jesus speak to us through something other than our own personal agenda.

### **THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

Personally, I think Jesus speaking of himself in metaphorical language—*“I am the bread of life, I am the vine, and I am the Good Shepherd”*—holds up pretty well even after two-thousand years as long as we don’t twist it and remake it into something suits our needs. I find it best to find those places where Jesus makes me uncomfortable because that might be the point where I’m starting to move in the right direction. When Jesus says *“Love your neighbor”* and you realize that you can’t always pick and choose who lives around you, then you might be on to something. When Jesus talks about money—more than prayer, fasting, love or peace by the way—then we might need to pay attention.

It might be that we need to stop sculpting a Jesus to suit our needs and start listening closely to what Jesus is saying as we explore his word and look for those places where our lives need stretching. If we can manage to empty ourselves of at least some of our agendas, we might truly hear Jesus speak to our hearts in an incredible and powerful way. If we can get ourselves out of the way, we might actually hear Jesus some incredible word in our hearts.

I believe that if we can get outside the lines of the box we have drawn we might begin to see a Jesus a more wonderful, attractive, compelling,

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<sup>3</sup>Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 122.

inspiring and unbelievably believable than the Jesus we've shrunk and trimmed to fit our box. What Jesus' detractors and even those of us who call ourselves Christians have a hard time grasping is that Jesus didn't come to start a new religion that would replace Judaism or any of the other religions of the time or this time. Jesus came proclaiming "***The Kingdom of God is at hand.***" Jesus kingdom is a place where

- Swords will be beat into plowshares. Today that would mean dreaming about tanks being melted down into playground jungle gyms and machine guns being recast as swing sets.
- Wolves will lie down with lambs. Today that would mean Christians, Jews, and Muslims throwing a picnic together, or Lefties and Right-wingers forming a band and singing in harmony, or nuclear weapons engineers being redeployed to develop green energy.
- Jesus healing of the lame, sick and feeding the hungry was an intricate part of his ministry. Today that would mean everyone would have enough to eat, and would have access to proper health care without the fear of going bankrupt in the face of a catastrophic illness.

If we are to call ourselves followers of Christ, then we cannot ignore Jesus and his ministry. Jesus cares for all of his Sheep. He is the Good Shepherd who continues to seek until the last sheep is brought safely home. Jesus doesn't want anyone left out of his Kingdom. Jesus words from the Gospel of Luke still ring true today (I hope).

***The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor . . . Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.***<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Luke 4:18-19, 21.

When the Good Shepherd encounters us with his love and grace our lives are forever changed. The Good Shepherd bring transformation and renewal but first our hearts have to be open. We have to erase the lines of the box that we have drawn around Jesus. We have to set aside our agendas and allow Jesus to set the ground rules for our lives.

We see the beginning of this kind of transformation in Albert Race Sample's character Racehoss. In Sample's book *Racehoss, Big Emma's Boy*, Racehoss is a damaged young man who has spent most of his life in the Texas prison system. He's learned how to survive in a brutal environment but then comes the day in solitary confinement when he experiences God's loving presence. Here's how Sample tells the story this true story:

*The slamming of the two steel doors still rang in my ears. Sitting naked on the slab in pitch-black silence, I hung my head as the tears bounded off the floor onto my feet . . . Sweat poured. Gritting my teeth, I hugged and rocked myself, trying to squeeze my head against the unyielding concrete . . . I mauled myself, scratching and tearing my body. Slumped, exhausted, on the slab I covered my face with both hands and cried out, 'HELP ME, GOD! HELP MEEE!' . . .*

*A ray of light between my fingers. Slowly uncovering my face, the whole cell was illuminated like a 40-watt bulb was turned on. The soft light soothed and I no longer was afraid. Engulfed by a presence, I felt it reassuring me. No pressure any more, I breathed freely. I had never felt such wellbeing, so good, in all my life. Safe. Loved . . .*

*And the voice within talked through the pit of my belly, 'DON'T WORRY ABOUT A THING. BUT YOU MUST TELL THEM ABOUT ME.'*

***I lay back on the slab. A change had taken place. Never before had I felt so totally loved. That's really all I ever wanted. The biggest need in my life fulfilled in an instant. And I loved that Presence back.***<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. His sheep hear his voice. Do you know his voice? Jesus knows you. Will you follow?

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<sup>5</sup>Albert Race Sample, *Racehoss, Big Emma's Boy* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1986), 276-277.