

Why Jesus Is Worth Following Today!

1. He is the Door/Gate to Fulfilment John 10:1-10

Over the next three weeks, my messages will centre on the theme “Why Jesus Christ Is Worth Following Today!” One reason I have chosen this theme is because it comes out of the Gospel passages for this week and the next two weeks in the lectionary. The lectionary is a three-year cycle of selected Scriptures from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament and the four Gospels. Many United Church clergy use the lectionary passages to speak from at Sunday services of worship. So the theme “Why Jesus Is Worth Following Today! flows naturally from the Scriptures that I and many of my colleagues will be using.

Another interesting reason is that every year around the Easter season, it seems, books are published and publicized and university professors and clergy are interviewed – all with a bent toward controversy, skepticism and suspicion about what has been considered the historic Christian faith of the past 2,100 years. This year, a United Church clergyperson *removed* the name of Jesus Christ from the Easter Sunday service! It makes me wonder if that minister considers Jesus really worth following today. That same clergyperson stated: “If someone says to me, 'Do you believe in God?' I can come up with an answer that would satisfy the courts of the United Church. But would it reflect what's stated in their statement of faith? I don't think so.” She was quoted in the March 22, 2008, issue of the *Globe and Mail*. So I wonder again, why would a leader with that kind of viewpoint want to be a minister in the Church of Jesus Christ? For being the Church of Jesus Christ is still the faith position of The United Church of Canada.

While the Scripture today is Chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, Chapter 9 is dominated by several questions that lead into our theme. Questions such as: Is Jesus from God or not? Is he a prophet or not? Is he the Messiah or not? In Chapter 9, Jesus had healed a man born blind and that action set off all kinds of controversy about who Jesus was – reflected in these questions of Chapter 9. You see, certain synagogue leaders had already decided Jesus couldn't be from God. So a man blind from birth being healed and now able to see was a real issue for them. Especially since Jesus healed him on the Sabbath Day. They even threw the healed blind man out of the synagogue because of his experience with and growing faith in Jesus. Then they heard themselves – the Pharisees, the leaders of the same synagogue -- being called blind by Jesus.

Now in Chapter 10, in the first five verses, Jesus tells the religious leaders and those within earshot a simple story. Listen to it from *The Message Bible*:

Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good -- a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it.”

It was a common enough story for Jesus' time. His hearers would know about sheep and shepherds because this was part of their daily existence. They would know something about faithful shepherds lying at the entrance way of sheep pens and about sheep relating to only one shepherd who had named them and whose voice they recognized. They would also know about abusive, unfaithful shepherds who were destroyers of flocks or who stole

from the flocks of others. The leaders, the Pharisees, would be aware of these ideas from their knowledge of the Old Testament.

But verse 6 states that, although Jesus told this simple story, they had no idea what he was really talking about. There were enough unusual and strange things about this story that his hearers did not understand what he meant.

So in the next five verses, Jesus retells the story. Hear it again from *The Message Bible*:

“I’ll be more explicit, then. **I am the Gate** for the sheep. All those others are up to no good -- sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn’t listen to them. **I am the Gate**. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for -- will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of – abundant life, life in all its fullness.”

There are two remarkable statements Jesus makes in his explanation of the story. First, he says that **he is the gate for the sheep**. Then, second, he says **he has come to bring his sheep more and better life than they ever dreamed of – abundant life, life in all its fullness**.

A shepherd’s role in many Eastern sheepfolds is to be a gate or door. The shepherd lies down at night in the gateway to stop the sheep getting out and to stop the predators getting in. That’s the intriguing thing about a door -- it keeps you in where there is safety and security and keeps danger out.

Now everyone certainly desires to be safe and secure. We are aware from other Scripture and from experience that “the sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust.” It doesn’t matter who we are, good or bad people, we are all subject to the same sun and rain falling on our lives. And in the same manner, it doesn’t matter who we are, good or bad, we are all subject to tragedies and suffering that affect our mind, body and spirit. So what is Jesus meaning about providing for our safety or protection? You have to read the rest of the story in this chapter. Three times in Chapter 10, Jesus speaks of himself with this vivid image: “I lay down my life for the sheep.” Though Jesus’ listeners would learn later what he was talking about, we know that Jesus meant this quite literally. He laid down his life so human beings could be forgiven. Then, in verses 27 through 29, Jesus makes more dramatic declarations:

My sheep recognize my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them real and eternal life. They are protected from the Destroyer for[ever]. No one can steal them from out of my hand. The Father who put them under my care is so much greater than the Destroyer and Thief. No one could ever get them away from him. I and the Father are one.”

Essentially, Jesus is saying that those who hear his voice and recognize it as the voice of “their” shepherd will be safe *forever*. He will look after them and, even death itself, the last great enemy, cannot ultimately harm them. And the reason Jesus can be so confident of this is because of his own unbreakable bond of love and union with God the Father. Jesus is the gate for the sheep – for humanity – to God.

The Good Shepherd said: I am the gate to safety for my sheep. I have named each one of them and so they recognize my voice. And **I am also here to bring my sheep life in all its fullness**. That is a most remarkable claim by Jesus. It reminds me of the cup in Psalm 23,

which is described as filled to overflowing by the Shepherd -- who is the Lord God. Abundance of life points to depth of living now and length of living in eternity. It is not only life as good as it can be here and now but also life beyond what we can even imagine then and there in God's presence!

Fulfilment or life to the full means different things for different people. And some people who live and work for only what is superficial should listen to actor Jim Carey who once said: "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer" ("Quotable Quotes," *Readers Digest*, March 2006). And maybe they should also take a cue from actress Candice Bergen. When asked by an interviewer to name three wishes, Bergen responded with the universal hope, "Aside from eternal life?" (*Reader's Digest*, September 2002).

Real life is knowing the true shepherd, not being deceived by a false shepherd or thief. It is something like the true story of one young girl. For her, it meant knowing she really was wanted and loved by her real father and not by the false protector who was really a thief, robbing her of the truth and of real life for too long.

On February 10, 1996, a 38-year-old security guard at a Pennsylvania middle school convinced then 14-year-old Tanya [Kach] to leave her father and live with him. So for the next 10 years, the security guard kept Tanya in the home he shared with his elderly parents.

Throughout the years after Tanya's disappearance, her father desperately tried to find her. He posted her picture several thousand times on flyers and milk cartons. To keep her from running away, Tanya's captor convinced her that no one cared she was gone -- that her parents weren't even looking for her. He told her: "You're stupid. You're immature. Nobody cares about you but me."

Eventually, the security guard became so confident in her loyalty to him that he allowed her to leave the house for short periods of time while he was at work. Through these daily excursions, Tanya became friends with the owner of a local Deli Mart. In March of 2006, Tanya finally confessed her true identity to this kind man who shared the information with his son -- a retired police officer. Before long, Tanya was rescued and reunited with her father. Commenting on the girl's situation, the Deli Mart owner said, "She wanted to be wanted, that's all."

Tanya's father was overjoyed to see her. "It was exactly 10 years, one month and 11 days," he said, "and there wasn't a day that went by I didn't think of her. I just say thank you, there is a God, and he brought my little girl back home."

Tanya, too, was delighted to learn that her father had never given up looking for her. "He's crying; I'm crying. All he kept saying was, 'I got my baby,'" she said, describing their reunion. "I'm touching blood and I get to say, 'I love you, Dad.'" [Daniel Lovering, "Woman Missing Since She Was 14 Is Found," news.yahoo.com (3-23-06)]

Tanya discovered she was loved by her true father who had faithfully searched for her until she returned home from the false protector.

And here is another story about a lost sheep:

Rev. Lee Eclov tells the story about how he stopped every Sunday morning on the way to church at a local gas station for a cup of coffee. That's where he became friends with a variety of people, including a fellow he called Stu.

On one occasion Stu asked him: "Hey, preacher, there are some of those born-again Christians at my office who won't leave me alone. What can I say to get them to stop talking to me about being a Christian?"

Lee said he was stumped at first although he chuckled at the irony of it all. But then he felt as if God gave him an idea. "Why don't you tell them that you'd rather not talk about that right now, but you wouldn't mind if they prayed for you." And to his surprise, that's what Stu did.

One Sunday morning sometime later, Stu asked him something he had never asked before: "What are you going to talk about this morning?"

Lee replied, "I'm going to tell the story of the Good Shepherd looking for the lost sheep."

To Lee's surprise, Stu replied simply, "I'm a lost sheep." Just like that. "I'm a lost sheep."

"You, uh, ought to come to church this morning," Lee stammered.

Although Stu didn't go that day, he eventually started attending occasionally. And according to Rev. Lee Eclov, Stu is gradually feeling more comfortable around church -- and around God too!

How is Jesus Christ giving you a fulfilling life -- a full life, life in all its fullness?

You may have heard of Lee Strobel. At one time he was an investigative journalist and an award-winning legal editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. He also considered himself an atheist. But he became a follower of Jesus while trying to prove that his wife's newfound faith in Jesus Christ was not based on fact and truth. He then became a minister and a broadcaster and is now the author of almost 20 books. In one of his sermons, he said:

How can I tell you the difference God has made in my life? My daughter Allison was five years old when I became a follower of Jesus, and all she had known in those five years was a dad who was profane and angry. I remember I came home one night and kicked a hole in the living room wall just out of anger with life. I am ashamed to think of the times Allison hid in her room to get away from me.

Five months after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, that little girl went to my wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." At age five! What was she saying? She'd never studied the archeological evidence [regarding the truth of the Bible]. All she knew was her dad used to be this way: hard to live with. But more and more her dad is becoming this new way. And if that is what God does to people, then sign her up. At age five she gave her life to Jesus.

God changed my family. He changed my world. He changed my eternity.
So said Pastor Lee Strobel.

And how can I tell you the difference God has made in my life? When I was a youngster, my family did not attend any church. I was about 13 years old when an adult from a church in my neighbourhood came to our home and invited me, as well as my brother and sister, to Sunday school. That was the beginning of a journey of search and discovery for me. I thought I was searching for God and, then, I discovered God had been searching for me! And God found me. I was 16 years old when, for the first time, I consciously said yes to Jesus as the door to life. For a mixed-up teenager, life began to make some sense as I realized how much I was loved and accepted by the Creator of the universe. And some of that love came through the adults of the church who, whenever they saw me, called me by name.

One of the significant things I have learned over the years is that sharing our faith is not only what we tell people, unless what we tell is totally consistent with who we are. It is who we are that is going to make the difference. If we do truly enjoy our faith and do truly enjoy God, people will catch that fire of enjoyment from us. If our lives are totally centred

on Christ and what matters to him – which we learn from what he taught --then we will be Christ-bearers for others, not only with our words but also with our lives.

Jesus Christ is the door to real life that is full and fulfilling.

May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller

Easter 4

April 13, 2008