

# I Know Not Why, How, or When

A sermon based on John 10:22-30

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May 6, 2001

My brother and I play a game which began some thirty years ago when he was asked to speak at a conference on mental health. I can only guess at why they chose him as the speaker, but one day, as he and I were browsing in a used book store he purchased two books on mental health to help him prepare for the conference. This seemed meagre ammunition for a conference speech, so I asked him, "How extensive is your mental health library? Does it consist only of the two books you just bought?" My brother replied that my question was such that he could not do justice to it in quantitative terms, and that he preferred to give me a more philosophical answer. I said, "No! Just tell me how many books you have on mental health!" To which he replied, "It depends very much on your definition of mental health." The game has continued for over thirty years; I try to pin him down, and he tries to slip and slide away from the question. And if upon our occasional visits I forget to ask him about mental health, he disturbs my own by mentioning that since our last visit he has greatly expanded his mental health holdings.

It's an enjoyable game, and I'm grateful to him for it, because it's only of late that I've realized how much it prepared me for congregational ministry! Indeed, we've expanded the game. My brother is a well-published author and whenever he pops a tome he sends me a copy. It's not too long before he asks me if I've read it, to which I reply in the ambiguous fashion I learned from him. He's convinced that I have not read any of his books, and since he'll get to read this sermon I'm not going to alleviate his suspense.

## Give Us a Plain Answer!

Our Gospel story features a similar type of interchange. "Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon," says John's Gospel, when some people "gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." (John 10:12-24) And Jesus' reply, to my ears, sounds anything but plain. He talks about their belief, or rather, lack of it (10:25-26); he talks about sheep (10:26-27) and familiar voices (10:27) and eternal life (10:28) and sheep snatchers, (10:28-29), all of which sounds anything but unequivocal. A plain answer would have been, "Yes, I am the Messiah."

The people who heard Jesus in Jerusalem wanted a simple declaration of his identity and mission. Some of his enquirers may have been sincere, but it's also clear that some of them were checking him out, as they checked out anyone who claimed to reveal the things of God. John tells us that this interchange took place during the Festival of Dedication, a festival marking the rededication of the Temple. During the Maccabean wars a pagan cult had defiled the temple, including the altar, and so this festival touched sensitive nationalistic emotions. The religious leaders, to their credit, didn't want unnecessary trouble from someone who might knowingly or unknowingly fan the flames of nationalistic fervour. Some of the more zealous leaders, of course, had already made up their minds about Jesus and were trying to trap him!

I find this interchange much more fascinating than all the sheep talk that precedes it. The sheep-and-shepherd imagery has become rather bland with time, and if I were a sheep, which the Gospels say I am, I would feel much more secure with a Shepherd who responds to cagey questions with some intelligence and wariness than I would with some feckless shepherd with naivete stamped on his forehead!

There are many Christians, however, who would have joined in the refrain: "Don't keep us in suspense. Tell us plainly." William Barclay, whom many of us know from his series of New Testament commentaries, for some fool reason wrote a series of books entitled:

- "The Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes"
- "The Plain Man Looks at the Lord's Prayer"
- "The Plain Man's Book of Prayers" and
- "More Prayers for the Plain Man"

The truth of it is that the late William Barclay was an exceptionally gifted preacher and broadcaster; a distinguished scholar; Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University; a member of the Advisory Committee working on the New English Bible, not to mention a host of other scholarly and professional appointments! It must have been some publisher's marketing ploy to produce these books, knowing that many of us like our religion plain and uncomplicated.

Gary Harder, the pastor of the Toronto United Mennonite Church, says that when he was six years old he was given a new colouring book, a prized possession, only when he sat down to colour with his cousin she was praised by both her mother and his! "Look how nice she can colour," they said. "She doesn't go outside the lines even once." ("Colouring Outside the Lines," sermon, Toronto United Mennonite Church, August 27, 2000) Years later, says Gary, "I am still afraid of a colouring book, or of a paint brush...." If colouring is a metaphor for life, or for theology, there is a part of us that would dearly like to be neat and tidy and stay only within the lines. We would like our faith, our theology, to be, if not plain, then clear—a black-and-white certainty in this uncertain world—and some of us will go to great lengths to keep it so.

A pastor (Mickey Anders) tells of a young family that visited his church for several months, and then left. They loved the people, loved the programs, loved the building, but when asked why they then left they replied, "Your church doesn't seem to believe in absolute truth." I get occasional enquiries along the same line, but fortunately I was not here to take the last such call. Instead, the caller asked Katie about this church's theology and whether we preached the gospel, and when asked specifically to recall what my sermon was about the previous Sunday Katie couldn't remember. That's okay, because by Monday I can barely recall it myself, but the caller went on to say something about professing ignorance, which I took as a comment on our pulpit ministry.

Christians with an absolutist bent say that you cannot believe that truth is subjective and also believe that the Bible is God's true word to us. The message God wanted humanity to have is what humanity has received. Absolutists want their faith purged of any ambiguity. They want only certainties, and are quick to tell you what you cannot believe. One of the few things they have in common is the belief that truth is absolute, and even if two or more of them hold many beliefs in common, they are quick to part company

when they disagree. If one disagrees with another, one of them has to be wrong, or at least spiritually immature. People who believe in absolute truth invariably believe that they possess it, and truth, in their hands, becomes a weapon rather than a guide.

## **My Own Pilgrimage With Uncertainty**

It could be that my response to this gospel story is coloured by my own pilgrimage with certainty and uncertainty. I've always been fascinated by people who have strong opinions on things—often on a lot of things—and sometimes, when I'm surrounded by a group of them, I feel quite inadequate. When I went to seminary, I was given a test to score my aptitude for theology and church work. I won't tell you what the test revealed about my suitability for church work, but I did pull off an unprecedented, almost-perfect score for flexibility. My brother explained that it meant I had no theological backbone. Maybe he was right, but I've never been able to work up a big head of steam over points of doctrine, and after three vivid reminders of my mortality I'm even less interested in finer points of doctrine.

My liberal arts education did a fine job of making me realize that there is more to truth than a doctrinaire theology allows, but with time I have also become somewhat disillusioned with a liberal approach to faith and life, helped, in part, by my introduction to the writings of people like George Grant, Jacques Ellul, and G.K. Chesterton. While I'm uneasy with plain answers, I've learned respect for tradition and find it offensive when a specific generation thinks it's found answers to ages-old problems. My own generation is the worst in this regard. We can summon up a lot of certainty on issues-of-the-week, but we're far less certain about fundamental matters.

Someone has renamed some of our hymns so that they are more amenable to our ambivalent professions of faith. For example,

- "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Much"
- "Joyful, Joyful, We Think Thee Pretty Good"
- "We Are Milling Around in the Light of God"
- "What an Acquaintance We Have in Jesus"

If you found those titles amusing, it's only because you know the real titles, but you're a dying breed. John Berthrong, the associate dean at Boston University's School of Theology, says, "When I talk to students about their own sense of religious identity, I find that more and more of them have been brought up in homes that are post-Christian. ... to say that they are reacting against Christianity is wrong; they've never been Christians. Even some of the ones who are Christian will say, 'But I really like Taoism and Buddhism too, and my meditation is Vipassana, but I also do a lot of work at my local church because I like the choir.'" (Jeremiah Creedon, "God with a Million Faces," UTNE Reader)

My vision of the church is that it be more than a loose collection of spiritual dabblers, and I don't find liberal spokespersons all that compelling. The movie, "Dead Man Walking," is about a Roman Catholic nun and her ministry to a particularly loathsome convict on death row as well as his victims, but when Tim Robbins, the director of this highly acclaimed film, was asked in an interview at the Berlin Film Festival to explain the motivating force in Sister Helen's work, he replied, "I believe in . . . er. . . that there are . . . er. . . that there are people who are on earth who live highly enlightened lives and who

achieve a certain level of spirituality in connection with a force of goodness. And because these people have walked the earth, I believe that these people have created God." (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, page 240) Goodness! He makes George W. Bush sound articulate! Robbins' film is an eloquent testimony to the power of a nun's religious faith in spite of his own halting testimony to a secularized spirituality.

A liberal approach to faith may be attractive in that it keeps various people vaguely connected to the church, but there has to be more to Christian theology and fellowship than the liberal dictum of tolerance. As William Willimon has pointed out, "Mere tolerance has rarely provided the moral resources necessary to stop an Auschwitz...." ("*Answering Pilate: Truth and the Postliberal Church*") And ironically, sometimes tolerance itself becomes a basis for condemning those who demand that their differences be taken seriously. If some refuse to adapt to our current levels of toleration or our definitions of reasonableness, then, ipso facto, they're being unreasonable!

### **Defying Stereotypes**

I don't care for the bigotry of progressive thinkers anymore than the bigotry of regressive thinkers. In fact, I don't like being put in a box, and I don't care whether it's a "born again" box, a "liberal" box, a "conservative" box, a "feminist" box, a "fundamentalist" box or an "Anabaptist" box! I do not find boxes or the labels adhering to them conducive to Christian love, but two very popular labels in Christian circles are "liberal" and "conservative". I resist using these labels because my experience with people and with life is such that these labels are not very helpful, and I seldom feel like being helpful to those who use these labels. Sometimes I tell them that I'm a conservative Christian with a very liberal disposition.

It warms my heart when people refuse labels or whose lives are such that they confuse those who are trying to get one or the other of these labels to stick to the stick-ee! Years ago I had a neighbour who sounded absolutist and unyielding, and had I only listened to him I might have written him off. I had only to watch him for a while, however, to discover that he had a heart of gold and would have given the shirt off his back, even to those he professed to detest.

There are also people like the late Sydney Callaghan, who was active some years back sowing the seeds of peace in Northern Ireland by purposely ignoring religious labels. Every community organization Callaghan helped found—including a hospice, a suicide hot line, and a housing association, to name but three—is open to both Catholic and Protestant. When his Methodist congregation went carolling in one of the poorest Catholic neighbourhoods in Belfast, local police warned Callaghan that they could promise the group no protection. Callaghan was undaunted, and as the carollers walked through the Catholic housing project windows began to light up and doors opened, as Catholics joined the Protestant singers in a peaceful, moving celebration of Christ's birth. Says Callaghan, "To suddenly discover that you have a common humanity with someone else ... erodes some of the built-in animosities and dislikes you've grown up with; ...you can't really dislike the person who has a human face, the person who you've sung with (and) shared laughter with."

We think we have someone securely labelled, and then people like Francis George, cardinal archbishop in the archdiocese of Chicago, come along. George who is known among fellow Catholics (Jerry Fuller) as very conservative, but he surprised everyone

recently by asking that Catholics write the President and ask him to pardon the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh.

I think too of people like Philip Yancey, one of the darlings of evangelicals, a publishing phenomenon whose books have nurtured the faith of many. Yancey, however, admits to painful periods of wondering whether God still is or ever was in the picture. His candid confessions of uncertainty to a constituency with little tolerance for it are refreshing. When Yancey became an editor-at-large of "Christianity Today" magazine, he was asked to sign a statement of faith "without doubt or equivocation". Yancey replied: "I can barely sign my own name without doubt or equivocation." (Steve Males, "Reaching for the Invisible God," Faith Today, May/June, 2001, page 74)

We are all spiritual whistlers in the dark, and I, for one, am glad that Jesus didn't reply plainly to his enquirers. That incident was not an isolated one. On another occasion he cautioned his disciples to be discreet about him (Matthew 16:20; Mark 8:30; Luke 9:21), and another time, when people wanted to acclaim him their king (John 6:15), he made himself quite scarce. When John the Baptist began to harbour doubts about Jesus he sent some of his own followers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:3) And again, Jesus does not give them an unequivocal answer, like, "No, I really am the one; you can stop looking now." There is a mystery about Jesus that I find intriguing but that continued to confound those who wanted to put him in a box.

### **I Know What To Look For**

Personally, I'm willing to tolerate a little ambiguity, a little complexity, a little doubt and uncertainty, a little metaphor and mystery. I may not know why, how, or when (from the hymn, "I know not why... I know not how... I know not when...", #338, Hymnal: A Worship Book), but I think I know what, because when Jesus' enquirers asked him for a plain answer, he answered, "The works that I do in my Father's name ... bear witness to me" (John 10:25, RSV), or, as another translation reads, "My deeds done in my Father's name are my credentials...." (10:25, NEB)

Similarly, when John's disciples visited him Jesus said to them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matthew 11:4-5)

Jesus, in good Hebrew fashion, is pointing his questioners, not to some abstract notion of truth, but to truth's authenticity, gauged by the sort of lives it produces. Our reading from the Book of Acts fits into this scheme quite nicely. The story concerns the death of a woman named Dorcas, who was well loved and well known for her "good works and acts of charity". (Acts 9:36) Luke, in recording the story, has little interest in Dorcas's doctrines or in the theology of Peter. He simply tells how Peter visited her and, to the everlasting gratitude of the women assembled in mourning, raised her to life! (Acts 9:37-43) An act of compassion is far more compelling than a jot and tittle of doctrine will ever be.

Paul Somers, a man whose family history has roots in the Quaker tradition says that the tradition made little impression upon him until one day, at the age of sixteen, he witnessed a Quaker refuse to swear on the Bible in court, saying that he would affirm his own truthfulness. Says Paul, it was that "which grabbed me and placed me in a Friends

Meeting for the first time. Such integrity and self-assurance—such witness coming from some place deep inside! I had to see where that was from. ... the refusal of that Friend to swear in court ... grabbed me at the age of 16 and still does 43 years later."

### **I Know Whom I Have Believed**

I'm willing to tolerate a little ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty in what I think about my faith. I may not know why, how, or when. I think I can recognize what—those works that testify to one's identity and faith—but even if that proves ambiguous, I know whom—I know whom I believe in, whom I follow. I know who came to me, a sinner and a stranger, and embraced me as a child of God.

Roland Bainton, a former professor of church history at Yale Divinity School, tells of a mosaic of Christ in a church in Constantinople which was plastered over when the city was invaded. Centuries later, however, the plaster has cracked, and one can see features of the face of Christ showing through the broken plaster.

This sermon may have done little but reveal my own confusion and intellectual laziness, but if in the course of our lives we can remove a few of the labels plastered over us, helping the face of Christ to emerge a little more fully, to be a little less obscured, that in itself would be a worthy contribution to the kingdom of God.

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.