

**CONVERSATIONS WITH JESUS:
No Stealing!**

*John 10:22-30 Trinity United Methodist Church April 24-25, 2010
Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

SUSPENSE.

Can you think of a time when you have been “in” suspense? Can you think of a time when you didn’t know what you needed to know?

The other day a woman from Indianapolis called. I was busy so her call went into my voicemail. I had called her office the day before with a question. The question I was asking was pretty important. The answer could impact my plans for this summer. When the woman called back, though, she just left her name and told me she needed to talk to me right away. And that she would be in her office and available until 2:30. I got her message around 4 in the afternoon. I’ve called back but haven’t gotten the word. There is an answer out there, somewhere, but I haven’t learned what it is.

I’m in “suspense.” Not a paralyzing kind of suspense. The rest of the week has been good. I keep doing what I need to be doing. But there is a part of me that keeps wondering. There is a part of my life that feels like it is on hold.

It’s interesting how we use the phrase “kept in suspense.” Suspense sounds like a kind of cage. A cell.

When you don’t know what you want to know, life can feel like you’re on hold.

THE DEMAND: “TELL US PLAINLY.”

The men walking with Jesus gather around him. They lean in and say this (:24), *“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”*

They say things aren’t clear.

They say Jesus hasn’t really laid out the case that he is -or is not- the Messiah.

They say he needs to be more definite.

They say Jesus needs to provide them with more evidence so they can make a decision.

Do you know what the actual Greek in the New Testament really says in verse 24? The verse that is translated into English as *“How long will you keep us in suspense?”* is -in the Greek- *“How long are you taking away our life?”* Until they can know, until they can make a decision whether to follow Jesus as Messiah, or walk away, their lives feel like they are on hold.

At one level don’t you have some sympathy for those people, huddled around Jesus on that cold winter’s day, demanding more clear cut answers, more obvious answers, more overwhelming evidence? Don’t you have some sympathy for those folks who are leaning towards believing Jesus is who he claims to be but aren’t sure?

I hunch some of us in this room aren’t sure.

I hunch some of us in this room have been looking, for a long time, for some piece of evidence, some kind of explanation, some kind of overpowering spiritual

“moment,” that would erase all doubt. Fully and clearly answer every question we have about Jesus.

This week, as I was hanging around in the 10th chapter of John, thinking about that group gathered around Jesus on Solomon’s Porch, I wondered about asking for a show of hands in worship: “How many of you here aren’t completely, totally sure that Jesus is the Messiah... the Son of God...the key to life on this earth and eternal life? How many of you wish you had more evidence? How many of you wish God would make everything more clear? How many of you want God to make everything about Jesus more obvious?”

At one level, you see, I have some sympathy for those folks huddled around Jesus. Because I want to say to Jesus, “Could you spell things out a little more clearly? Could you say something that would dispel, once and forever, that part of me that isn’t sure?”

JESUS HAS DONE ENOUGH.

Some of the people say, *"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."*

And Jesus answers (:25-27): *"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*

Jesus knows some of this is tough to sort out, but Jesus also knows he has said other things that are very, very clear. Jesus tells the people in the temple, “I’ve said enough. I’ve told you plainly and clearly that I am God’s Anointed One. I’ve given you enough evidence to make a decision.

He has made it plain enough.

He has done enough.

There is the water he changed into wine. John 2.

There is the Samaritan woman whose life was wrecked. She was swallowed up by shame. Jesus gave her living water of forgiveness. Jesus loved the shame right out of her. John 4.

There is the man sitting by the pool. Who had been waiting for thirty-eight years to be healed. He was an invalid. Jesus walked up, talked with him for a moment, and said, *"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."* And the man walked away. John 5.

There is the crowd of thousands. Gathered up on the hills above the Sea of Tiberias. They’re hungry. It’s late in the day. A boy is there who has food. The boy turns his five barley loaves and two fish over to Jesus, the Nazarene gives thanks to God, and everyone has enough to eat. John 6.

Jesus has done enough.

JESUS HAS SAID ENOUGH – PLAINLY ENOUGH.

Jesus has said enough. He has made it plain enough.

Over and over Jesus makes, in the Gospel of John, stunning claims about himself as the Messiah. God's Anointed One. The source of life and healing and truth.

Jesus makes things clear early on in his ministry.

During his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus says this in John 4:14: *"Those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

Later during their encounter, out there in the heat of the day, the woman says this in John 4:25-26: *"I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."* Jesus responds by saying, according to John, *"I, the one speaking to you – I am he."* No, I didn't get that right. John actually says Jesus declared, *"I, the one speaking to you – I am he."* Jesus doesn't just say it: Jesus *declares* it! This is a claim he doesn't just whisper: this is something Jesus *declared!*

The people in the temple want Jesus to say more, make it all clearer, but Jesus has said it enough. Jesus has made it plain!

In John 11:25-26 Jesus is having a conversation with one of his best friends, Martha. Martha's brother has just died. It's three days after the funeral. Jesus shows up. They are having a conversation about the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. Martha says she knows her brother, Lazarus, will one day live again. Jesus turns this conversation between friends into a startling claim about his own power over death: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."*

In John 14:6 Jesus says: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

In John 14:9b-10 Jesus says: *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."*

"Would you solve the riddle?" the people gathered around Jesus in the temple say. "Would you say things plainly? Will you make it so clear that you'll remove all doubt and give us certainty?" they are asking.

And Jesus says, "I've said it clearly. I've said enough."

THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD.

Some Hear.

There are sheep who hear the voice of the Shepherd.

Then there are sheep who hear the voice of the Shepherd and believe. But they do something extraordinary. They do something more than believe: they follow.

(Faith – Certainty.)

I need to say something about faith. About belief. Especially this weekend as we baptize people into the faith and have a whole group of young disciples being confirmed into Christ's Church as Jesus-followers.

Here is what I need to say: faith and absolute certainty are two different things. A good number of folks inside the church and outside make the mistake of thinking that faith is the absence of doubt.

There are some of us, I suspect, who carry around some guilt, or embarrassment, or perhaps even some shame, because of the doubts we have. The questions we struggle with.

Guess what?

We all have doubts.

We all have struggles.

Faith is deciding to follow Jesus, trust Jesus, even though you know there will be days, moments, when you aren't sure.

Following.

There are people who hear the voice of the Shepherd.

Then, there are people who hear the voice, believe the voice, and follow.

One of the moments in the New Testament that always stuns me is that scene, in the 4th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus is walking beside the Sea of Galilee. He sees two brothers, Simon and Andrew, fishing. They are throwing a fishing net out into the water. Jesus says, "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to catch people for God." Matthew 4:20 says, "*At once they left their nets and followed him.*"

Then, just down the shore, he sees two other brothers, James and John. They were out in a fishing boat with their dad. Jesus called them, Matthew reports, and "*immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*"

I have to think there were other people on the beach that day.

I have to think there were other people fishing. Working on their nets.

I have to think there were other people who heard the voice of the Shepherd saying, "Follow me." They heard the voice but they stayed right where they were. Which is, I suppose, the sensible thing to do at some level. Stay right where you are. Keep doing what you are doing. Figure out life as well as you can. Why take a risk and go off following Jesus? Who knows where he is going to end up taking you?

It is amazing thing.

All sorts of people hear the voice.

But some people believe the voice...and some people stand up and follow.

Pastor Rob Bell, in his book *Velvet Elvis* (pg. 20-21), points out that everyone believes in something. Even people who say they are non-believers are believers in something...something. Someone I know, for example, believes in i-Phones. He finds it just intolerable that I have gotten an HTC phone that operates with a Microsoft system. My friend believes in i-Phones the way a young Bobby Knight believed in man-to-man defense in basketball. Everyone believes in something.

There are people who decide that Jesus is true, and that the way Jesus teaches is true. That it works. That it is congruent with the way the universe has been designed.

Rob Bell says this about deciding to believe in Jesus and be a Jesus-follower:

As a Christian I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.

This isn't irrational or primitive or blind faith. It is merely being honest that we all are living a "way."

I'm convinced being generous is a better way to live.

I'm convinced forgiving people and not carrying around bitterness is a better way to live.

I'm convinced having compassion is a better way to live.

I'm convinced pursuing peace in every situation is a better way to live.

I'm convinced listening to the wisdom of others is a better way to live.

I'm convinced being honest with people is a better way to live.

This way of thinking isn't weird or strange; it is simply acknowledging that everybody follows somebody, and I'm trying to follow Jesus.

Bob, as Donald Miller tells the story in *In a Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, lived in San Diego. He and his family were sitting around on New Year's Day when one of the kids mentioned she was bored. Bob agreed. They all agreed that New Year's Day was one of the most boring days of the year. So they talked about what they could do to make New Year's Day less boring.

The kids talked about buying a pony or building a rocket ship. Someone suggested having a parade. Bob got excited. He said he thought a parade sounded great.

So Bob, his wife Maria, and the kids dreamed up what the parade might look like. People could wear costumes. There could be balloons. Friends could come over and watch. Maria talked about having a cookout after the parade was over.

Because it's more fun to be in a parade than watch one, they decided to make a rule: nobody would be allowed to watch the parade. Anyone could be in the parade but no one was allowed to just sit on the curb or up in their yard and watch!

Bob and the kids went up and down the street. Knocked on doors. Told people about the parade where everyone could join but no one was allowed to watch. The whole idea seemed kind of funny: knocking on your neighbors' doors and telling them about the parade. Inviting them to join. And if they didn't want to join then asking them to turn away and not watch as it went by.

Look away or join the parade: that was the message they delivered to everyone on their street.

Bob, Maria and their kids got dressed up and -with a few neighbors- began marching down the street. When they saw someone standing along the street or up in a yard they pulled them into the parade. By the time they got back to their house for the cookout there were about a dozen or more people with them. Sitting around. Hanging out. Eating hamburgers.

Over the last ten years the parade has grown. Now it attracts hundreds of participants. People who used to live in the neighborhood and have moved away now come back for the parade.

Bob sent his friend, Donald, a picture of the parade. That particular year the mailman who worked the street had been chosen as the grand marshal. In the picture of the parade you can see that everyone is in the street. No one is sitting on the curb.

So there you have the story of Bob and the parade.

To decide to follow Jesus is to make a decision to join the parade.

It is a decision to get into Jesus' story and make it your own.

THE RISK OF BEING TAKEN FROM GOD.

There are these sheep who hear the voice, believe the voice, and follow.

Which is sometimes -often- a risky thing.

I was watching a video clip the other night on a local newscast about the Department of Natural Resources releasing trout into an area stream. The DNR employee held a trout or two up for the camera, and then we were shown the release of the fish into the river.

The DNR team stood in the stream, watching the fish begin to move away, and they looked just a little anxious. A little nervous.

When we decide to follow Jesus, when we get baptized, when we are confirmed, God and the church -in a sense- release us into an uncertain and imperfect world. We know there are all sorts of experiences, all sorts of challenges, all sorts of temptations, all sorts of heart-breaking moments, that can pull you away from Jesus.

I have a friend who was a Bible study leader. Really had some pretty amazing insights into scripture and into people. Just one of those people who seemed to have it all together. Then, something happened in a ministry they were leading. My friend didn't agree with a decision and she was done. Done with church. Done with Bible study. Done with worship. Done.

I have another friend who just got busy. That's what we adults too often teach children and youth: how to be busy. How to never stop. How to be well-rounded and successful. My friend was really something. She and God were close. In fact, she was one of those people who pushed me to step up...step out...let God set me on fire. But she got busy. And it was all good stuff. She's not around anymore. She sort of fits God and prayer in between the other stuff.

We're like DNR officials releasing you, when you decide to follow Jesus, into the stream. Into life. Into the future.

Here is the truth of it: sometimes I worry about the things that might overwhelm you. Crash your faith. Wreck your relationship with Jesus. Sometimes I worry about the things that can put out the fire of genuine faith.

But Jesus says something amazing in today's scripture. Listen to John 10:27-30: *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all ^[a]; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."*

This is an extraordinary statement: Jesus is saying that once the Father gets a hold of us nothing is going to be able to steal us away from God. Nothing is going to be able to snatch us out of the hand of the God who loves us.

A month or so ago we used an affirmation of faith that talked about Jesus being crucified, dead, buried, and descended into hell. Before ascending to heaven and sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Someone sent me an email the week after that. It was a good email asking a good question. "Why would we say Jesus went to hell?" the person asked. "Hadn't he suffered enough?"

I told the person that the church believes Jesus loves us so fiercely that we believe Jesus went down into hell to set free those who were held captive by the devil. God doesn't give up on us, the church believed then -and the church believes now. If we insist on kicking God out of our life, then God will -finally- let us have our way. Honor our choice. But God loves us with a fierce, gracious, stubborn love. And God doesn't give up easily. So the early church talked about Jesus, after he was killed, going right down into hell and setting those children of the Father free!

Jesus says there is no experience, no power that can steal us out of the Father's hand.

No stealing.

The devil can't steal you from God.

Cancer can't steal you from God.

Being so successful you start to see yourself as the axis around which the rest of the world revolves isn't going to steal you from God.

Depression isn't going to steal you from God.

Getting busted and ending up in prison isn't going to steal you from God.

Going broke isn't going to steal you from God.

Having a messed up family isn't going to steal you from God.

Getting so wrapped up in religion that you become a hard-hearted, self-righteous, judgmental little Pharisee, isn't going to steal you from God. God is going to keep working, and the Holy Spirit is going to turn you around...soften that hard core...help you learn to the lessons and life of grace again.

Going through a divorce isn't going to steal you from God.

Romans 8:38 tells us that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Wow. Nothing!

One of the most important words in my nearly 3-year old granddaughter's vocabulary is "mine." (I'm mentioning here because a couple of you have asked me, in the last few weeks, "Are Ella and Olivia okay? We're just wondering because you haven't said a thing about them for a long time." So I don't like talking about them. But some of you have asked.)

She uses it all the time.

If I pick up her little plastic giraffe, that goes with her plastic zebra, her plastic pony, her plastic pig, and per plastic horse, she reaches for it and says, "Mine."

On Easter afternoon we had an Easter egg hunt at the house for the girls. By the time I got home Ella had an Easter basket with about 30 plastic Easter eggs. I pulled one of those out of the basket, put a couple of M & M's in it so they would rattle around

if Olivia shook it, and I handed it to the 9-month old. Olivia was delighted with her one, purple plastic egg. Ella came into the living room, saw her sister playing with that one purple egg, and said, "Mine." We talked about sharing. I pointed out how she had a big basket full of eggs. Ella's head dropped to her chest and she walked out of the room silently. Shocked that she was being asked to let go of one of her plastic eggs.

"Mine." That is one word she knows how to use.

As possessive as a three year old can be, though, God puts her to shame.

God is possessive.

God is stubborn.

God doesn't like to share us...or let go of us.

The Father is greater than anything or everything that would try to snatch us out of God's hand.

"Mine!" God shouts. To whatever power or heartbreak or free threatens to pull us away from the Father, God says, "Mine! You can't have him...you can't have her!"

There is a story about a young boy in Florida who went swimming in a pond behind his house. He didn't tell anyone. He didn't ask his mom or dad. It was hot. So the boy took off his shirt, his shoes and socks, and jumped into the water.

As he was swimming towards the center of the pond he didn't see an alligator swimming towards the shore. The father who had come running over to the pond saw the alligator. He yelled at his son to turn around...head for shore as fast as he could.

Just as the boy began to get out of the water, the alligator snatched his legs. The father, standing on the shore, grabbed the boy's arms. There was this crazy tug-of-war between the alligator and the father.

A neighbor took care of the alligator.

The boy ended up in the hospital.

His legs were scarred by the attack. On his arms there were deep scratches where his father had been hanging on.

A reporter came out to talk with the boy. The journalist asked if he could see the scars on the boy's legs. The boy lifted his pant's leg.

Then, he said to the reporter, "But look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms, too. I have them because my dad wouldn't let go."

No stealing.

Some hear...and some follow.

Some who follow are anxious, scared, that something they have done...or will do...something that has happened or will happen...is going to take them out of God's hand.

Our God is greater than anything and everything else.

God doesn't let anyone take what rightfully belongs to him.

"No stealing!" God says. "You can't have my child."

"No stealing."