

# Why Follow Jesus?

## “He puts his life on the line.”

### John 10:11-18

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#### Impersonal

What was her name? She was the new girl; and in a fifth grade class filled with kids who'd been together since kindergarten, that in itself was a liability. It seemed that no one got to know her. Since everyone already had a circle of friends, I don't know if anyone tried. I was off the hook because she was a girl and fifth grade boys didn't have to make friends with girls.

The second strike against her was her appearance: she was an easy target for insults. One day some classmates formed a circle around her at recess shouting, “Kill it before it multiplies!” I suppose they did it for their amusement; and perhaps in a twisted way it made some of them feel better about their own selves. I recall the circle and the hurt look on her face. I don't remember whether I was a part of it. What I still remember though is that I didn't try to stop it.

What was her name?

If you had a friend under attack, you'd defend them. If a friend got in trouble, you'd probably help. But, how responsible are you for people you *don't* know? And, why should their welfare make a difference to you?

#### Jesus' Preferential Treatment

Jesus said, I AM the good shepherd; and at once he put himself in a league with God and God's work. From way back, prophets had drawn a contrast between people who were more interested in themselves than the people they were supposed to care for and God, whose caring for them would stop at nothing. One of the prophets, Ezekiel, cast that in shepherding terms. He said that those who were supposed to be the shepherds were feeding themselves and letting the people, their flock, go hungry and weak and become vulnerable to all kinds of attack. Then the prophet said it was God who would be the true shepherd, who would seek out those who were scattered, feed them with good pasture, strengthen the weak and bind up the injured.<sup>1</sup>

I AM the Good Shepherd: Jesus would fulfill God's promises, and like good shepherds of his time, he would lay his life on the line to save his flock from destruction.<sup>2</sup>

This is who Jesus is. Jesus' disciples were wondering about what was good for them, and one day they asked him who would be the greatest in God's Kingdom. Jesus called for a child and he stood with her, hands on her shoulders and his followers all around. I can picture him looking at each them in the quiet.

He had asked for a child, who in the day was *not* celebrated for innocence or purity, and probably *not* considered cute or amusing. Children were excluded, powerless, without resources, vulnerable, and expected not to get in the way. Kind of like a dirty little bleating sheep: a child was symbolic for anyone who had that kind of status. *Anawim*, they called them, *little ones*: without means and without status. What was Jesus doing with one of these?

Yet, Jesus said to them, "Unless you change from the way of selfishness at the expense of others and become vulnerable and without status like a child, you won't be in the Kingdom. In terms of the playground scene, he was saying that you've got to step out of the circle and stand with the girl in the center.

The shepherd: that's what Jesus did and that's what he expected of his followers. Jesus said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest...Whoever becomes a shepherd like me...Whoever welcomes one such child, or people who are excluded or hurting or poor, *in my name* welcomes me."

This is what the sound of his voice is saying. And you have to know the sound of his voice to know what it means to follow him. To follow him is at once to be cared for by Jesus *and* to become like him. Our identity is all wrapped up in his: he is the shepherd, and as his flock, we are to be shepherds, too.

What is it about Jesus and his fascination with people on the low rung of the social ladder? He begins his ministry with a motley flock of followers: people who fish for a living; a tax collector who is hated by everyone else; Zealots who are dangerous to be around; and (forgive me, this is the value of Jesus' day) even women are allowed to follow him from town to town – something a respected Rabbi of Jesus' time would never permit. They're mostly peasants; not the kind of people who are learned or moneyed or socially skilled. He starts his most memorable sermon on a mountainside with the words, "Blessed are the poor." Confronted by a rich man wanting to be sure of

salvation, Jesus says, "Sell all you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me."

When he is almost to Jerusalem he sums up all his work with a parable about the peoples of the world appearing before the King who separates them like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Then the King says to the side on the right: "Come in. I was hungry and thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison and you cared for me." They ask, "When was all that?" the King replies, "When you did it to the least of these, (when you did it to the *anawim*), you did it to me."

Jesus really is consistent. He identifies with the child. He loves the poor; and if you want to be with Jesus, you'll go to his friends.

Peter Storey is a retired Methodist bishop in South Africa who played a major role in the liberation of that land. He says that Jesus does not love the poor because they are any less sinful than anyone else. You and I both know the poor are not. He loves them because they are *the most sinned against*. They are the easiest targets: the easiest not to know so people can take advantage of them, so as the rich get richer the poor get poorer. Jesus is for rescuing and caring for those who get in trouble. Jesus is for rescuing and caring for his friends, especially ones like the girl in the center of the circle.

I understand why someone wouldn't want to get too close. I understand reluctance to get too close to disease, and vulnerability, and heartache. Yet Jesus says that we need to go with him to them: the children; the poor; the discredited. Go to them even though it can make you something of a sitting duck, yourself. Care for the *anawim* as he does. It's not just a matter of being nice or heroic. It's as vital to your spiritual life as knowing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...*

This is why our Methodist spiritual forbearer John Wesley spent much of his time with people living in poverty and in prison, founded orphanages and hospitals and called on other Christians to do the same. He discovered that there is no religion but social religion, and there is no gospel but the social gospel; and the more he was with the little ones he discovered it was not just a duty, it was like prayer and reading scripture: it was a means of letting loose God's grace.

It still is. Ask our youth and their leaders after they spend time with people in need on their mission trip this coming summer. If they look into the faces of those they serve, they'll probably discover the beauty of God's people, precious in God's sight. If they learn someone's name, they might make a friend. If they take the time to sit with them,

listen to a story, and share points of view, they might discover the sharing of God's blessing and the truth that ministry is not just one a one-way street. It's a blessing shared back-and-forth.

There's something about being in the midst of the flock. When you're out there putting yourself on the line...like Jesus did...it's where you get to know love. There's reason for following Jesus to become a true shepherd like him. Following him to care for those who are most in need is where you find Jesus. It's where you to find real life.

### **Following**

Before visiting South Africa, I had heard of the townships. I had heard of people living below levels of subsistence, many dying from AIDS and illnesses you get from drinking unsafe water. I had concern for *those people*: concern enough to contribute, at least sometimes.

A bus carried Laura and me from Cape Town to a street in Langa Township while I looked at the shacks and the crooked, unpaved road on which they were lined.

It was a car-window tour until the driver pulled over and our guide swung the door open and bade us get out. He told us to say, *Molowe!* to the people, (*hello* in Xhosa) and he introduced us to Patricia, who was working with other women to prepare cooked sheep heads for sale. We stood in the smoke of the cooking fires and spoke for several minutes. She said she couldn't understand why she was tired already, she'd only put in 6 hours of her 10 hour day, a schedule she kept 7 days a week. As we spoke, poverty was given a face for me, poverty was given a name. Now, it is no longer *those poor people*. Now, it is Patricia, who has two adorable children who love to have their picture taken, and who stands in the smoke long hours to work very hard every day.

Patricia is one of the flock. Jesus loves Patricia; this I know; and I can't duck Jesus' question, "Do I?"

The name of the new girl in my class...was *Linda*.

Linda needed a shepherd.

In fact I believe that even though we let her down, she had one.

And I bet that if we had decided to know her instead of insult her she wouldn't have felt so alone and hurt.

I believe if we had given her our friendship, we would have been blessed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ezekiel 34

<sup>2</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. pp 669-670.