

“Jesus Swapping Just Ain’t Cool!”

John 10: 22-30
Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time
Pg. 1-3, Marcus J. Borg

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April 25, 2010

Most of you know that I am a bachelor which means that I get to clean my own apartment. I have certain chores that I keep up on pretty well. Grocery shopping, keeping the kitchen clean, doing laundry and vacuuming are not a problem for me. The one chore I really hate, however, is cleaning the bathroom. It usually takes company coming over before I find myself doing the gritty work of cleaning sinks, toilet bowls, and showers. When it comes to cleaning the shower I have a favorite product that makes the chore bearable. It’s *Kaboom* and all I have to do is spray it on, wait about five minutes, and then wipe it off as it cuts through the dirty build up.

I don’t mind sharing the good news that there is a product out there that can cut through the weeks and probably months of shower build up. In fact, I had a friend recently who was complaining about his shower and I lent him my bottle of *Kaboom*. I figured anything that would work that well for my shower would work just as well for his shower. Miracle cleaners like *Kaboom* deserve to be shared and swapped with my friends.

Speaking of swapping, in recent years there has been a TV program both in the U.K. and in America called *Wife Swap*. It’s interesting that in the program wife swapping has not produced the same positive results that swapping cleaning supplies does. Interestingly enough you can share cleaning supplies with a friend and get the same positive result, but you can’t share wives and expect that just because your wife makes your family happy that she will make another family just as happy.

In one review of the show it reports that *“At the end of the two weeks, the two couples all meet together for the first time, and the wives, along with their husbands, discuss how they felt about the two weeks. This often descends into personal insults and has degenerated into violence at least twice.”* (Wikipedia)

Why is it you can share a shower cleaner and expect that what works for one shower will work just as well for another shower? But if you share a wife or a husband or a family member what works beautifully in one family can be devastating in another family? Cleaning supplies are easily interchangeable, but family members are not. Why is this?

Well the answer is really quite simple. A wife or a husband or any person is known in the context of a relationship. We are not seen as the same person in every relationship. When my children were teenagers how they saw me compared to how my colleagues saw me were completely different. Who we are and where we come from changes how we see another person. The type of relationship we have with another person changes how we see that person. The victim sees the cop one way; the criminal sees the cop another way. Same cop. Different experience.

It’s interesting in our gospel lesson today that we have the same Jesus standing among Jews in the temple with probably a handful of his disciples with him. The Jews are asking, **“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”** Jesus answered them, **“I told you, and you do not believe...because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”**

Isn't this interesting? He is talking to the questioning Jews and we can only assume that they heard him talking. Yet, he says that his sheep hear his voice and they follow, but they do not. It's not that they were deaf or that a big semi drove by just as Jesus tried to tell them about being the Christ. In fact, Jesus doesn't even say that he is the Christ here. Rather, what he says is I have already told you and you don't believe, but the works I do tell the real story.

We sometimes wonder why others can't see what we see in Jesus. In our tradition we call Jesus "Lord and Savior." We sing the hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. We are fond of quoting the gospel of John that Jesus is the "bread of life" or "the good shepherd" or the "way, the truth and the life." Our confessions speak of Jesus as the Son of God and "very God of very God." And we wonder why it is that if we can see that why others can't see the same thing.

I think the mistake that we sometimes make is that we think that if we've had a certain experience of Jesus everyone else should be able to have that same experience. That is, we mistakenly assume that our experiences are interchangeable. What we do is treat Jesus as if he were a bottle of shower cleaner. We assume that if it works for us it's going to work for everyone else in the same way. What we do is objectify Jesus assuming that our experience of Jesus is the real experience, the only valid experience. And then we wonder why others are so slow to see what we see. We wonder why others seem to have so little faith. We wonder why others can't see that Jesus almost has the word "Messiah" tattooed on his forehead where everyone can see it.

But, we need to remember that we experience Jesus in relationship. I wrote an article over fifteen years ago that compared our fondly calling Jesus the Son of God with a man who calls his wife "*the most wonderful woman in the whole world.*" We are all aware of how common this is. Couples routinely share how each of them is the most wonderful man or woman, wife or husband in the world. But, if you think about it every man who says this can't be right, correct? There can only be one "most wonderful woman in the world." Yet, we don't dismiss men who say this about their wives thinking, "Well, I know Margaret is wonderful, but quite honestly, of the 3.5 billion women in the world I can think of at least ten who are more wonderful." We don't do that, right? We don't even think about going there because we know that the man who is saying that is not saying that he has made an objective analysis of all the women in the world and after analyzing his wife in over 100 categories of wonderfulness it turns out she just happens to be head and shoulders above the other 3.5 billion women in the world. We know that the man isn't making an objective truth claim. He is making a love claim. He is making a subjective love statement. He is sharing his experience of his marriage. His view of his wife is based not on an objective analysis, but on the depth of his love for his wife.

Marcus Borg gets at this in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. He says that one of the traditional ways of seeing Jesus is through belief. That is, it's a matter of having right belief. Another way is through seeing Jesus as a great teacher so the focus becomes a matter of having right behavior or right morals. Borg then introduces a third way that actually is much more ancient and that is the way of relationship. He says what distinguishes this approach from the others is that it isn't a matter of getting it right—whether right belief or right morals—it's a matter of being open to an ongoing journey of transformation and growth. It's a matter of being in relationship with Jesus.

What I like about this is that it seems a lot more honest about the actual reality of our lives and our faith. I can tell you that I have personally experienced a number of significant changes in my life as I have matured, aged, and faced a variety of both challenging and wonderful life situations. If it is about right belief then I have to wonder where on the journey

did I get it right. Was it the Jesus of my naïve, but exuberant faith in my early 20's? Was it the Jesus of the highly intellectual faith of my seminary years? Was it the Jesus who emerged after my children were born and radically changed how I saw the gift of life? Or was it the Jesus who has been emerging in recent years as I have attempted to make sense of a painful divorce and the deaths of three parents and in-laws? If real faith is about having right belief then I find myself looking at all the different ways I have seen Jesus and asking tongue-in-cheek, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?"

What I like even more about this is what it means to be part of the community of faith. If the journey itself is what is most important think about what that means for us as people of faith. We no longer need to worry about who has right faith and who doesn't. We no longer have the need to call ourselves a liberal or a conservative church because everyone who has committed to the journey is valued no matter where we are on the journey. There are no litmus tests about who is in and who is out. All that is really important is that we come to our faith honestly, with integrity and sincerity. It's the relationship with Jesus that becomes the trademark of our Christian community rather than orthodox belief.

We have for too long treated Jesus like a good shower cleaner. Just spray him on and you too will be saved. "It worked for me. It must work for you," we think. But, why then did the Jews in our scripture lesson today not have the same experience as the disciples? Why, if it's as simple as that, do some people completely fall in love with Jesus while others treat him as just another good teacher in a long line of spiritual gurus? Why? The answer lies in our text today where Jesus says, "**You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.**" If we believe that the Christian journey is to have right belief we may end up feeling a little snobbish to this group of Jews. There can be a sort of feeling of "*Looks like we are in and you are out. We are part of the family and you are not. Looks like God loves us more than God loves you.*"

But, if we believe that the Christian journey is primarily about being in an ongoing relationship it changes how we read this passage. Why do we see one thing in Jesus and others see something else? Why do we call him the Son of God and others only a great teacher? Because some of us fell in love with Jesus and once you fall in love you see everything with new eyes, with fresh eyes. And no matter how hard you try you just can't make another person have the same experience. Your experience is your experience and they aren't interchangeable. This is why, in the TV series *Wife Swap*, the couples often end up throwing insults at each other after their little swapping experiment. You take a person out of the context of one set of relationships and put them in another set of relationships and the experience is completely different.

Unfortunately, I think we have often treated Jesus like a shower cleaner. We advertise him as the best thing on the market. We tell people all you have to do is follow the easy 4-step plan on the back of the bottle and your life will be as clean, shining, and sanitized as our lives. In fact, we will even share and swap our experience of Jesus convinced that others will be just as satisfied. We are utterly convinced that what worked for us must work for others.

And if salvation is through right belief then Jesus swapping is the way to go. We have the right answer, we have salvation in a spray bottle and all we need to do is get as many people to use this product as possible. But, if salvation is through a relationship as Borg is countering then we have a whole new parable to consider. If the TV program *Wife Swap* teaches us anything it is that you can swap cleaning products, but you can't swap people from one relationship to another.

Many of us have fallen in love with Jesus. It's okay to shout out just how you feel about Jesus. Tell everyone you want to that Jesus is the most wonderful man in the world. Share how deeply you feel about Jesus by calling him the Messiah and the Son of God. Talk about how much he means to you by saying he is the bread of life, the good shepherd, and the way, the truth and the life. Don't be afraid to share how much you love Jesus.

And then let go and let others have their own experience of Jesus. I think Marcus Borg might be right—that salvation is not through right belief but through an intimate loving relationship with Jesus. If that is true then Jesus swapping just ain't cool. You can swap cleaning products and get great results every time. But, you can't swap wives, you can't swap husbands. And if Marcus Borg is right you can't swap Jesus because what works in one relationship won't work in another one.

Jesus says in our gospel lesson today, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Why do we hear his voice and others do not? It's not because we have secret knowledge. It's because we have fallen in love and love has a way of changing everything.