

## The Chicken or the Egg Question

I am sure that everyone is familiar with the chicken or egg question...which came first? I have found that many people try to use logic to answer that one, that it has been used to prompt discussions for debate teams and philosophy classes. But until reading a commentary on the passage from John's gospel for today I had never considered it a particularly enlightening question. From my point of view God created all the creatures in whatever way God thought best and set in motion all the changes which have occurred through the centuries.

I think we are still evolving...at least I hope so because we really need to get beyond taking violence as the first option for solving problems. We may still be changing physically as well as all of creation lives and therefore does not remain fixed or static. Biologically speaking mutations occur in all forms of life so our effort should be more focused on the things we can work on...like being better witnesses, more obedient disciples, etc. as we allow God's presence in our lives to transform us. It is about that last thought that the question of which comes first arises. The text from John's gospel takes us back in the narrative to a time before both the crucifixion and resurrection. This passage continues the teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples about his identity in chapter 9 as the Good Shepherd. That passage described the role of the good shepherd as one who protected and provided for the sheep of his flock. Exactly how much later this text occurs is not clear but it is probably about three months the location is no longer a village with a local audience. As he was walking through the countryside Jesus has healed a blind man on the Sabbath in response to a question from some walking with him. A question about what sin the blind man or his parents have committed to cause the blindness. Some of the man's neighbors and the Pharisees investigate the healing. There is a debate about Jesus' identity as either someone sent by God or by the devil. After telling the Pharisees that they are the ones blind, Jesus goes on to describe himself as the Good Shepherd. Today's passage from the later portion of Chapter 10 is set in Jerusalem during winter at the observance of festival of Dedication. Jesus is walking near the temple and some Judeans who have gathered around him demand clarification about Jesus' identity saying: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Reading Jesus' response I can't help but feel that it is said with exasperation: "I have told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to be." That seems to us so obvious that we often feel like that if we had been there, we would have had no doubts. We seem constantly amazed that anyone having seen what Jesus was doing could doubt his identity. But Jesus' response did not stop with that disclaimer that they should be able to know just through what he is doing. Instead Jesus' response continues this way: "but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." The texts which we lift for study follow a path throughout the year designed to teach the faith. The first half of the church year focuses on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and answers that identity question: "Who is Jesus?" The second half of the year focuses on Jesus' ministry and teachings in order to answer the question: "What does it mean to follow Jesus?" When we listen to Jesus' response we might hear it in a couple of ways. First, we might hear it as a promise that Jesus knows us—knows who we are and what we need—an affirmation that we will be protected and provided for. Of course, if we think about that carefully as did the writer of Psalm 139, it might cause us to be a little uneasy...not really sure we want Jesus to know us completely with no

secrets held back. We know that while we desire to be known fully, so we can have intimate relationships with others that may result in rejection if we cannot be accepted as we are. Yet we believe Jesus does know us that way—the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the hopes and fears, the accomplishments and failures, the acts of fidelity and those of betrayal. Jesus knows us that completely and still promises us a relationship with him (and thereby with the Father) that transcends this world. A second way we might here this declaration is that there is no testimony more powerful to our resurrection faith than doing Jesus' works: healing, comforting, freeing, feeding. After all, since Jesus says that it is his works that testify to his identity, then will not ours do the same? This is not a new theme from our scriptures...we have that hymn based on Jesus' words on the night before he died; the one that proclaims they will know we are Christians by our love. But when talking of our faith, it is often in response to a question like this: "Have you accepted Jesus into your heart?" Actually, the best answer to that would probably be a referral to ask one's neighbors for they will know better if my actions demonstrate it. Of course, if we take our identity as being that firmly based on our actions or our "works", then we find out we are not as "Christian" as we thought or we might begin to think we merit or deserve God's intervention on our behalf. But we need to remember that the responses Jesus gives is given a specific context. Thus we have the question about which comes first—the belief or the following Jesus' teachings...chicken or egg in terms of the opening question. What is the difference between the commanding to do these things in order to be in the flock or the commissioning that because we are his sheep, we will do these things; trust me because I know you? Within the framework of John's congregation this was probably made a part of the narrative to explain why some members of the Jewish faith accepted Jesus as the long awaited Messiah while others did not. However, for us this also raises a question about whether or not this belonging is determined ahead of time. Yet this is also a question for us for we know people—very good people—who do not profess a faith in Jesus. So how do we reconcile these things for our own spiritual well-being? One way is to look at how we human beings behave in general. An interesting observation from behavioral studies is that despite our intuitive thinking that belief shapes behavior, that is our actions follow our convictions; the results showed that more often than not it was the opposite that happened. Our behavior is more likely to shape our beliefs. For example, people who were persuaded to recycle for a month increased the commitment to environmental issues beyond what it was before they began the month of recycling. In short, we tend to justify our actions by shaping our convictions and even our identity—often unconsciously—to explain and support those actions. When could mean that the popular exclamation—I'll believe it when I see it—should be reframed to slightly but significantly to: I'll believe it when I do it. This understanding of human behavior helps make sense of what Jesus is saying. Yes, those who believe him are part of his flock and follow him. And at the same time, those who are following him are more likely to believe in him and identify as part of his flock. We tend to separate out "believing" and "following," but according to both Jesus and modern psychologists the two actually go together. Or, to put it another way, it's really hard to be an armchair Christian. Only by getting out of our comfortable chairs and actually living the Christian life do we come to deeper faith and commitment. We come to know the one we are following so much better when we engage the world as he did, God's vision for the world becomes clearer when we are following the one who shows us what God's vision is for life here on earth. Jesus' argument about being blind to

what he does and teaches also means that while our words may not be enough to persuade skeptics of the truth of the gospel we are still given the task to follow and do the same kinds of works that he did. If those around us do not believe the gospel on the basis of what happens on Sunday mornings, perhaps they will believe—or not believe—based on what we do the rest of the week. A quote attributed to Alice Walker is “Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.” Our daily ministry in the world is crucial. Jesus tells us that our struggles with belief are rooted in our refusal to belong. Jesus came to teach us about truth, about love, and about eternal life in God’s just and transformative kingdom. Jesus claim on his sheep does not allow us to stand outside the flock. It requires us to step inside and be among all the other sheep. One doesn’t simply profess belief in such weighty and mysterious things—one lives into them, questions into them, believes into them and grows into them. What Jesus also makes clear is that those who follow and belong to him are in no danger; “no one will snatch his sheep from his hand”. The voice of the Good Shepherd establishes the belonging; our status does not depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. Our status depends on being known by our shepherd, a knowing that liberates rather than oppresses. Our shepherd tells us “you belong to me already; no one can take you out of my hand”, not do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.” Sheep know their shepherd because they are his; they walk, graze, feed and sleep in his footsteps, beneath his rod and staff, within constant earshot of his voice as described in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. So we believe as we belong—as we allow ourselves to become fully and deeply his. He walks ahead of us, and we will only learn his path and ways by walking them. Believing and following come together. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.