

Sermon preached at OCC, 11 May 2025

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

John 10:22-30

Believing, Belonging, and Behaving

Happy Mother's Day to you all! Are you planning to do something special this afternoon? I hope mothers all around the world will celebrate being mothers as God's gift and grace. Last Saturday, I attended the Mainly Music Conference at City Baptist Church with Pauline, Jenny, Rachel and Julia. Mainly Music was celebrating its 35th anniversary, and the founder, Jo Hood, was emotional when she presented her testimonies about how many people worldwide shared their wonderful experiences with the Mainly Music team, notably in Australia and the UK. When I looked around the conference room, except for a few men, they were all mothers or grandmothers in age. The two speakers delivered a deep scripture-related session based on their personal experiences. As one Mainly Music team, they were like a family by believing in what they were passionate about, belonging to one whanau under the name Mainly Music, and behaving continually to offer a comfort zone to toddlers and mothers with joy and laughter. Today's reading is about the same theme - believing, belonging and behaving.

Believing

In this reading, Jesus is walking in the temple through Solomon's Portico during the festival of the Dedication, or Hanukkah, where the Jews challenge his identity. Jesus' identity is already clearly described from the beginning of this chapter. Jesus is the Gate and the Good Shepherd; the names show who he is, his relationship with his followers, and how this is possible as one family in God. His identity intrinsically defines his work and relationship with followers, and it is all possible as the Father and the Son are one. Jesus plainly shows that the doubting Jews have no part in his flock unless they believe. As such, they don't belong to the sheep pen – the God's family.

There is also a huge gap in understanding what Messiah means. In Jesus' time, the notion of the Messiah among the Jewish people was largely shaped by expectations of a political or military leader who would deliver Israel from Roman occupation and restore the kingdom of David. That could mean that this Messiah was anticipated as a human, divinely anointed king, not necessarily a divine figure, who would bring justice, peace, and national renewal. Jesus'

claims to be the Son of God/Messiah challenged these expectations by claiming his divine identity through the unique relationship with God as the Father. It also redefines the notion of Messiahship, which is spiritual rather than political, by emphasising suffering, humility, and salvation from sin, not liberation from Rome. So if believing in Jesus shapes who we are, then what does it mean to belong to him? That's what we'll look at next.

Belonging

The Jews who can't believe Jesus' words, despite his good works, naturally don't belong to the sheep pen where Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Belonging plays a significant role in faith, especially in one's identity and life. In *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Sceptical*, Tim Keller cites Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor regarding one's identity: The contemporary idea of the self is that you define yourself. For instance, you don't connect to God, you don't connect to your family; you look inside and you determine who you want to be. You have to be true to yourself. You go inward. In this case, it creates an incredibly fragile identity that needs recognition and affirmation and can never get enough.

Meanwhile, traditional society says you are a citizen, a family member, and a believer in God, all of which are based on your connections to things outside yourself. Jesus is saying much the same thing. He tells the doubters that he is one with God and that he knows his followers, and they know him, proving that he comes from God.

In our story time, *the Bad Seed* truly believed he was bad at everything. The question was what made him bad and what also made him change. From the story, we learn that he used to belong to a happy sunflower seeds family. In fall, everything changed with his strong relationship with his seed family. Once he didn't belong to group or any family, he acted badly as no one would tell him to behave well. He began to doubt his identity as someone who was once a good seed. He was isolated and no one seemed to care about him. We may say that his bad behaviours were an outcry for his loneliness and a yearning to belong to a family. Later, when he saw a mirror reflection, he began to think about himself, and that was the turning point, as if the prodigal son suddenly remembered the Father's house. That's when he came to his senses and returned to his Father's house. Once we know to whom we belong, our lives begin to reflect that relationship. That brings us to the final part of our journey: how we behave.

Behaving

Let's return to the Mainly Music conference. We believe this ministry still has so much to offer young families - many of whom may not regularly attend church. They come not just for the songs and playtime, but because they experience something deeper: love, connection, and care. Toddlers build friendships, and their mothers find support from leaders who feel like older sisters or aunties—one family under God. This kind of love is what we are called to live out. Not to earn God's acceptance, but because we already belong to God.

In *The Bad Seed*, we see a story of change. Once separated from his seed family, he felt alone and unloved. But when he remembered who he was, he turned back toward goodness - not because he became perfect, but because he longed to return to where love once lived. His changed behaviour flowed from a rediscovered identity.

Sometimes, we also lose sight of who we are - especially in a world that looks to political leaders or influencers as saviours, hoping they'll lead us to a better future. The people of Jesus' time longed for a Messiah who would bring political freedom, but Jesus offered something far greater: eternal life, peace, and belonging. So how do we behave when we believe in Jesus and know we belong to him?

Jesus says: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."¹ To believe is to trust in the Shepherd. To belong is to rest in his love. And to behave is to live in a way that reflects that love to others. Like *the Bad Seed* who remembered his roots, or the Prodigal son who returned home - we, too, are called to reflect who we are in God's eyes. Not perfect, but loved. Not self-made, but chosen. Not lost, but found. So as we leave today - on this Mother's Day - may we live as people who believe in the Shepherd, who belong to his flock, and who behave in ways that shine with the love of God. May God help us walk in his truth. Amen.

¹ John 10:27