

OTHER SHEEP
John 10:11-18
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One of the odd things about being a minister is that I get to hear everyone's opinions about Christianity, and I don't even have to ask. All I have to do is be out and about in a clerical collar, or hand someone a business card with "Rev." in front of my name, or honestly answer another parent at a school function when they say "what do you do for work?" and the floodgates open. I hear opinions about Christianity on airplanes, in waiting rooms, and around the Thanksgiving dinner table. I hear opinions that are very well-informed, and opinions that seem to be based almost entirely on some television special about extraterrestrial alien visitors. I hear opinions from people who are fervently devout, people who've never set foot in a house of worship, and everyone in between. It can test my patience sometimes, but it's also fascinating and moving to hear all the ways the Christian tradition has been transformative in people's lives and all the ways it's been toxic, the ways it's healed people and the ways it's hurt people, the ways it's been communicated and miscommunicated to society at large.

One of the things I hear most frequently from Christians and non-Christians alike is how troubled people are by their perception of Christianity as an exclusive faith tradition. People say to me things like, "I like the things that Jesus did and taught, but I just can't understand how Christianity could say that people are going to Hell unless they believe exactly what you believe." That kind of sentiment goes back through the ages. Perhaps Gandhi most famously phrased it this way: "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

I sometimes wish I could say, "Oh, Christians don't believe that at all, there must be a misunderstanding." But the truth is, much of Christianity has taught, and does teach, that only Christians – and only a particular kind of Christians, at that – are included in God's love. Much of Christianity has taught, and does teach, that God's redemption is contingent upon our orthodoxy – our believing the right theology. So when people express hurt, anger, and frustration at Christianity's exclusivity, their impressions are based not on misinformation, but on the real teachings that are prevalent in parts of the Christian faith. Fortunately, though, that is not all of Christianity. I can listen and empathize, and I can truthfully say that the Christian tradition is deep and rich and multivocal. There are many possible ways of thinking about those issues, and today's Gospel reading speaks to another way of thinking about who is in and who is out.

Today, on Good Shepherd Sunday, we ponder scriptural images of God and Jesus as shepherd. We hear the familiar and reassuring words of the 23rd Psalm that speak to God's provision for us - guiding us to nourishment in green pastures, offering us rest and peace by still waters, accompanying us through the dark and frightening places of life. We hear Jesus describing

himself as the Good Shepherd - the one who knows each of us, who lays down his life for us, just as shepherds would risk their own lives to protect the flock from predators and thieves. We hear of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who shields us from danger and guides us toward abundant life. Tucked away amid these familiar words are some words that are a bit surprising: "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."

"Other sheep that are not of this fold." Those words are full of both promise and mystery - who are these other sheep? Could it be that Jesus is suggesting that God's flock is bigger than Christianity has often taught? It's interesting that Jesus claims to have "other sheep," because it runs against what his listeners would have known of shepherding practices. Sheep require constant care; they are prone to wandering off, and susceptible to predators and thieves. They bond with their shepherd, responding to his voice alone. Shepherds in Jesus' time would typically have stayed with the flock all day long, tending to them while they grazed in pastures during the day, then herding them into an enclosure - a sheepfold - at night, and sleeping with their bodies blocking the entrance of the fold so that the sheep couldn't wander out, or predators come in, without stepping directly over the shepherd. It's hard to imagine a shepherd to having multiple flocks, with one flock unknown to the other. I think Jesus' words about other sheep would have been a surprising and thought-provoking thing for the disciples to hear, and it should be surprising and thought-provoking for us as well.

Who are these other sheep? Christians have offered a wide variety of interpretations. Progressive Christians tend to read this verse with an eye toward non-Christians, suggesting that the "other sheep" are faithful people of other traditions: Muslims and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, who encounter God's truth and God's voice in another form. (Incidentally, while this interpretation is beautiful and helpful, it is not always especially welcome in interfaith dialogue. People of other religions are understandably offended when a well-meaning Christian tries to explain that they are following Jesus without realizing it.) Or perhaps people might hear this passage and think of agnostics and atheists, those whose dispositions lead them not to believe in what cannot be proven - some of the most compassionate and ethical people I know are atheists, doubters, and skeptics, those who never stop wrestling with the big questions but simply do not connect with the idea of faith in a God they cannot see. Another interpretation suggests that Jesus' words were meant to prepare his Jewish disciples to welcome Gentiles into the early church. Yet another common interpretation of this verse encourages Christian unity, as interpreters suggest that each denomination or congregation is just one of Jesus's flocks. This interpretation urges us to set aside our theological bickering and denominationalism and acknowledge that whether we are Reformed or Catholic, UCC or Pentecostal, all of us are drawn to Jesus' flock, united across our difference by our Shepherd's love for us, and our love for him.

I think, though, that we miss the point if we try to get too specific about the identity of these "other sheep." The point is not to help us discern more accurately how far God's grace extends;

Jesus is not trying to help us improve and refine our judgments about who is in and who is out. In telling the disciples that he has “other sheep that are not of this fold,” Jesus challenges them, and us, to let go of the desire to make those determinations on God’s behalf, to think we have the complete roster. Jesus challenges us to encounter every neighbor, no matter how different from us, as if they might be a sheep in his flock.

For us, you would think it would be easy, wouldn’t you? From our congregation’s statement of welcome, to your decision to call me, a minister of another denomination to serve in your church, to our denomination’s collaborative relationships across denominational lines, to our present and historical collaborative relationships with Jewish neighbors, we think of ourselves as a pretty inclusive and accepting bunch. And I think we are. The bigger struggle for us, or at least for me, is our attitude toward Christians who are less inclusive than we are.

Every week I hear stories that break my heart and make me fume with rage about what others are doing in Jesus’ name. I hear stories of people who think their Christian faith means they are called to impose their faith on others, and ban books from libraries and schools that have ideas they don’t like, or people that don’t look like them. I hear stories of churches that object to women’s ordination. I hear stories of churches that use their voices to denounce and demean, and church structures that use their power as a weapon against queer and trans people. Sometimes I want to say those people aren’t Christians – that they are not part of Jesus’ flock at all. I mean, they can’t be, can they?!

But Jesus tells us that there are other sheep in other pens, and that they are his too, and he does not tell us how to figure out who they are. He tells us that he is always trying to gather his sheep up, and bring them together. There is a world of difference between attacking someone else’s faith and sharing your own. There is a world of difference between saying “this is what I know of my good shepherd,” and saying “that person isn’t part of his flock.”

Jesus tells us that there are other sheep, and he does not tell us how to recognize them. And so our challenge is to let go of our quest to determine who is counted in the flock, and who is not. Our challenge is to embrace the mystery of a God whose love and grace are far beyond what we could ever imagine – a God who loves us when we are narrow-minded and petty, when we are stubborn and selfish, when we are judgmental and exclusive, and when we are just plain wrong. The good news is that we are loved and cared for and guided by a Good Shepherd who loves us, not because of our regular church attendance, or our well-formed theology, or our acts of Christian mercy and justice. We are loved not because of what we have done or failed to do, but because Jesus is our Good Shepherd, and Jesus is God, and God is love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.