



April 25, 2021

4th Sunday after Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday/Vocational Sunday)

*John 10:11-18*

Rev. Nathan Fong

*O God, may we hear your voice speaking to us this day as we are led by your Spirit to follow your paths of love and truth, through Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd.*

**Amen.**

Have you ever felt like you just didn't belong? I know I have. See, way back when dial-up internet still roamed the earth, I was in high school just being all teenager-like. I was still finding out who I was, defining my personality, and figuring out how I fit in my family, among my friends, and in the world. And if the "pork chop and apple shawsh" episode of *The Brady Bunch* taught me anything, it's that I'm not the only one who went through this type of existential crisis.

I think the school administration figured that I wouldn't be the only one, so to aid in the process they had all the students in grades 10 and 11 I think it was take these career aptitude tests. Perhaps you know what I'm talking about. Basically they are an extensive list of very personal questions that we answer as honestly as possible and they're supposed to help you discover your perfect career. It's sort of like a paper form of Tinder, but for jobs.

Anyway, I think I did at least a half dozen of these tests throughout those years, just because each one had a different slant to them and perhaps would give you more ideas. I don't know. But strangely enough for me, while my friends kept getting all these cool jobs like doctor, lawyer, and race car driver, I seemed to always get basically the same answers. In first place without fail, I'd get religious leader/Rabbi/priest. But in second place, I'd get plumber and once I got sanitation worker. Nothing against plumbers or sanitation workers, but really?

And of course, all my friends scoffed at my first place answer, not because they were against religion or anything like that, but more because...well...I'm not really religious leader/Rabbi/priest material. First of all, I'm not Jewish so that can be scratched right off the list. But while I was raised in the church and actually kind of enjoyed being in the church, I wasn't your typical religious kid. I didn't fit the stereotype that most people have in their heads. Even members of my own family even once said that they don't think that I'm cut out for it because I didn't have the demeanour or intellect of a pastor, also they warned me that my paycheque as a pastor wouldn't allow me to afford all the stuff that I'd want. Basically, I was too goofy, too dumb, and too materialistic to make it in this field.

But that started something in me. Actually, it just continued something that was already in me since I was in grade 6, but that's for a different sermon. But in spite of the naysayers I continued on this path toward vocational congregational ministry and here I am.

Well who's laughing now?

...nobody. Nobody's laughing now.

But you can see how I felt like I didn't belong. I felt it with my friends who thought it was weird that this kid that grew up with them doing all the urban kid stuff with them would become a pastor. I felt it with my family who thought I wasn't cut from the right kind of cloth and wanted "better" for me. And then I started to feel it within myself as all the things they said continued to ring in my mind, causing doubt, suspicion, and fear.

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says in today's gospel lesson, "I know my own and my own know me."

That sounds real pretty, Jesus, but if you know me so well, why did you put me in this position where I feel this way? Why did you burn this passion within me for the gospel and its proclamation? Why did you call me, of all people, to serve you in this way?

Because clearly, I don't belong. Clearly, I don't fit in. Clearly, I don't have what it takes if I have doubt within myself of myself, my abilities and talents or lack thereof, and how long I can last without trying to make an inappropriate joke.

And so I wonder how many of us might feel the same way. Maybe we feel like we don't belong as well, maybe we feel like we can't do much to help further the kingdom of God

because we aren't talented enough or knowledgeable enough or whatever enough to make it. Maybe we have felt the call into ministry but brushed it off because if Jesus really knew us, there's no way he'd even consider us for anything remotely close to that. Maybe we've thought that.

But Jesus' words here don't sound facetious at all, do they? I don't think Jesus isn't lying about knowing us here. He probably isn't pulling a prank and just waiting for us to fall on our faces and be all like, "Just kidding! Got ya!" Which is kind of a pity as that would be kind of hilarious and quite honestly something that I would do. Maybe not to any of you, mind you, but to my kids for sure.

No, Jesus words here are to encourage us. Reassure us. Empower us and lift us up and remind us that even when the world tells us that we aren't good enough or don't belong, God continues to call by name and invites us and welcomes us into Jesus' one flock where he is the shepherd and we are known, blessed, and dearly loved. His words here are a promise that have not, are not, and cannot ever be broken.

What always strikes me in this passage is how Jesus talks about these "other sheep" that don't belong to this fold, and yet they are also just as included and welcome. As we all might have had that experience of not belonging, perhaps we've also felt that there are these "others" that don't belong. Whatever the case may be, I see Jesus here talking to us about them. Reminding us that they do, in fact, belong. And at the same time, I see Jesus here talking to *them* about *us*. Telling them that we too, in fact, belong. Revealing to us all that, in whatever demographic we find ourselves in or identify with, on whatever margins we feel like we're residing just outside of, within whatever label that we associate ourselves with or has been unwillingly affixed to us, we belong.

Not because we fit any kind of divinely predetermined mold that people expect of us. Not because we've earned enough points to get us in that higher tier of life and God's grace. Not because we're the sheepest sheep that ever sheepled in the flock. But because Jesus knows us, through and through, and has decided to love us anyway. And not just to love us, but to equip us and empower us to be God's children in the world: flawed but cherished, broken but healed, sinners but regarded as saints.

See, regardless of how we might feel about who we are, God has declared us as enough to be God's beloved. Regardless of how we might think we fit in or don't, God has welcomed us into God's flock with Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Regardless of how we see ourselves compared to our peers, our colleagues, or even our enemies and frenemies, we completely, wholly, and unequivocally belong.

Today, aside from it being the 4th Sunday of Easter, it is also Good Shepherd Sunday as well as our church's Vocational Sunday. And so I encourage every single one of you that if you've ever even had a whiff of a call to serve in ministry, talk to your pastor or deacon about it. If you don't have a pastor or deacon, then talk to a trusted friend or loved one about it. If you don't have a trusted friend or loved one, then ok, you can contact me and we talk about it. But let me assure you, if a dumb, goofy, materialistic teenager like me can find a way to belong in the church as a pastor, then I am certain that you can too.

And so as we continue in this season of Easter, as we continue to look at the empty cross and be reminded of a resurrected Christ, may we take the call that Jesus has for our lives to be part of his flock, that we might follow the leading, guiding, and caring of our good and gracious Shepherd that knows us and loves us. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*