

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
John 10:11-18
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Good Shepherd of the other sheep

Welcome to this, our fourth Sunday of Eastertide. We are still celebrating the resurrection of Christ, which is the bold statement that Christ's mission of liberation, peace, and regard for the downtrodden shall not end with his death, but shall be resurrected into new life. And here in John we have the pronouncement that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will lie down his life for his sheep, even the sheep outside the sheep fold. So this morning I want to talk a little bit about those other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. And I will argue that the mission of Christ cannot survive, unless the other sheep are welcomed into the sheepfold.

Please Pray with me, Lord of Inclusion. You have said that the nations shall stream to your holy mountain where you will sit as judge over the nations, settling disputes and making plowshares where there once were swords. We pray that you might open up these scriptures this morning, so that we can join in your peacemaking mission. Amen.

Jesus lays down his life for the downtrodden, which can put us in a difficult position. The journey of the cross was marked by Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and being rejected by the religious authorities. What are we supposed to make of that since we sit within the structure of church power. Who has the church rejected? Who would it be scandalous for us to eat with? Who is outside the sheep pen and has been welcomed by Christ, but are still waiting for us to extend the hand of fellowship so they can be let in?

Welcoming in people of a different sheepfold is difficult, but Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

We here at church, like so many churches are a mixture of priests and renegades, respectable members and vocal prophets. And the church needs all sorts to thrive, but I think it will be a useful exercise to pay attention to ourselves during this sermon, what kind of people do we think should and are a part of us and what sort of people do we feel that self-defensive feeling creep up? Who do we consider sinners and think should change before we welcome them in? Pay attention to your breathing and your heart rate, to how your body responds. We are not perfect, we are all shaped by our experiences and what people we trust have taught us. Pay attention to what kind of sheep you consider part of the sheepfold and who you consider outside. I think the answer is different for each of us.

Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the United States. Even when churches are multi-racial, they tend to all be of the same socioeconomic class. And yes, our connection to the later service probably makes us one of the most diverse churches in the United States. However,

I know this church is full of bridge builders and others for whom the latter service is too different. Mixed into the soup of racial difference is theological and political difference. We worship in a different way and that can create tension between the services. I have people who come up to me after a united service and talk to me about how they feel uncomfortable worshipping with the latter service because of how different they worship.

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Or think about the current crisis that is dividing the church, which is including LGBTQ people into the sheep fold. I think of telling cartoons that show Jesus holding a gay sheep as the lost sheep, and the 99 sheep of the sheepfold saying, oh no, that one is not lost, we kicked them out. Pastor Juan and I have preached about the importance of letting that sheep back into the fold. Still, we both have had the feeling of stepping on eggshells while we do it. A fellow pastor of mine frustratingly posted on facebook; how is it so, that we can preach about peace, feeding the hungry, racial justice, and so many other justice issues without needing to carve out room for disagreement, but when it comes to welcoming in LGBTQ issues we must leave room for homophobia for the sake of church unity. It is because we are like the priests and Pharisees, we are bound by the power structures of organized religion that say, yes we must care for the poor and the downtrodden, but only the right kind of downtrodden.

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In the scriptures, the problem with the priests and pharisees is not that they are bad people, but because they are so wrapped up in the separateness of people that they could not see how difference does not negate union. These good religious people of Jesus's day were obeying their rules about who was worthy and who was unworthy. They are wrapped up in powers far beyond their control. But Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and fishermen. Jesus knew well how we are different, and preserves this difference. The other sheep remain different, they maintain their identities as other, be they gentiles or sinners. But Jesus brings them into the sheep fold. In the story of Acts, Peter and the others are arrested because they healed a cripple, who can now enter the temple. Because in that day, cripples were not considered whole, and they had to sit outside the temple gates. So Peter has committed the same crime as Jesus, letting people into the sheepfold who do not belong.

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So what are we to do, as people already in the temple courts, people who Jesus has welcomed into the sheep pen of God's people? I want you to think back to what made you feel uncomfortable in this sermon. Which difference would you consider too great to truly welcome people into our sheepfold? Is it differences of race? Theology? LGBTQ affirmation? Toward

whom are you like the hired hand who when you see the wolf coming do you abandon that justice issue and run away. When the going gets tough, what hill are you willing to metaphorically die on and which hill could you let another year pass without welcoming in people of a different sheepfold? This year, I have been guilty of doing this. I'm not asking you this question because I think we should agree on all things, but to say when I read this message about Jesus being the Good Shepherd I see a very difficult challenge for us to welcome in the other sheep. And welcome can mean very different things, it could mean accepting all people because we are all beloved children of God or it could mean affirming people for their particularities. This is not about our own theological convictions, but figuring out how we do church together.

Because I want to let you in on a secret. One of the most powerful tools in the hand of the powers and principalities is divide and conquer. Thinking back about women's suffrage back in the 1920s, some advocates of women's suffrage argued that they should let white women vote in order to neutralize the African American vote protected by the 14th amendment. Or today, when acceptance of our latino siblings in Christ necessarily means rejecting LGBTQ people in the church.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus did not die only for one kind of person. Jesus died for the gentiles and Jews. Jesus died for the gay and straight. Jesus died for conservatives and liberals. The author of John's Gospel begins with an amazing pronouncement that Jesus lives for the whole world. And today we recognize who Jesus is willing to die for the whole world. Many of us here are part of the sheep already in the sheep pen, let us join in Jesus's mission of bringing in the other sheep also.