FMC 1-21-24

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I Have Other Sheep

On this day, January 21, in 1525, a small circle of believers gathered in the home of Felix Manz, near Zurich in Switzerland. After time spent in prayer, Georg Blaurock stood up and asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him ‘in true Christian baptism’ based on his faith. Grebel did so, and then the others present requested Blaurock to baptize them, which he did. With this beginning, a new church was formed which was distinct from the established church connected to and regulated by the state. The Anabaptist movement had begun.

Today is World Anabaptist Fellowship Sunday, remembering that event 499 years ago and celebrating our common roots and relationships in the body of Christ. In 2023, one international organization and 108 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches from 60 countries belonged to Mennonite World Conference. Mennonite World Conference chose the theme “Mosaic: Becoming a part of God’s bigger picture”. This theme was chosen because (and I quote) “Mennonite World Conference has many members, each one different from the others, and yet together the members create a beautiful picture of the body of Christ.” Our texts today were chosen to explore this theme.

John 10:14-16 is part of a larger passage in which Jesus uses the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to describe both his relationship to the Father, God, and to the people who follow him, the sheep. Jesus says that in the same way that he and the Father know each other, he and the sheep, those who follow, know each other. It is a relationship characterized by mutual trust, loyalty, and steadfast love, love that remains even at the cost of life itself.

The context of this passage is important. Chapter 9 of John’s Gospel is the story of the man born blind, a man that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisees and religious leaders question the man and his parents, asking if he had really been born blind, and if so, how had he received sight. The Pharisees do not like the man’s answer, that Jesus has done this and must be from God. “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” they exclaim, then they put the man out of the synagogue.

This is a story about boundaries, who is in and who is out. Jesus contrasts the spiritual sight of the man born blind with the blindness of the Pharisees who do not see God at work in the man’s life. Chapter 10 follows. Jesus compares the shepherd of the sheep to the thieves and hired hands who do not care for the sheep but are motivated by self-interest, greed, and power. Unlike the hired hands and the thieves who break in to steal, the good shepherd cares for the sheep. The good shepherd provides for their needs, leading them to good pasture and back to the sheepfold where they are protected and cared for. Unlike the hired hands, who run away when danger is near, the good shepherd is willing to die in order to protect the sheep.

This is a beautiful picture of how much God loves us and provides for our needs. We can rest in that belief and be comforted by God’s presence with us. We are called by name. God knows each of us intimately and loves us. But this relationship also calls us to community. We are part of a flock, a community of others also called by name.

In our Old Testament text this morning, Job 42:1-6, Job has endured a series of misfortunes and hard times. He has suffered long and lost much. He has reason to be angry with God. But in the end, he comes to understand that God is still in charge. God is still sovereign, even in times of suffering. Maria Del Rosario Pena De Melo, of the Mennonite Church in Colombia, writes of the Job passage: “The call to the church is to take measures to reduce pain in all its forms, forming a new people that sows peace, harmony, tranquility and truth. Those instructed in the Word of God are transformed in their hearts to make decisions by faith to remain in the light of the gospel. It is there that the text from Job comes to life, with eyes to see the care, the love and the mercy of the living God taking human form as it walks with the weak, the needy, the exiled, the ones who have suffered violence.”

I think that is where our texts this morning intersect. In John, it is Jesus who recognizes the plight and suffering of the man born blind. It is Jesus who responds with care and healing, restoring the man’s sight and in effect bringing him into new community, the fellowship of disciples who follow Jesus. It is when we hear Jesus’ voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, and follow, that we also walk with those in pain, those who suffer, those with needs, those who need God’s care.

This passage from John has a missional focus. Jesus said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” Who are these other sheep, this other flock? Some have suggested this refers to Jews who lived elsewhere far from Jerusalem, or perhaps to Samaritans, or perhaps to Gentiles, or even perhaps to churches that followed leaders other than John, such as those that followed Peter or Paul.

I think sometimes we think that to belong requires the other to become like us, as though we have an exclusive claim to the Good Shepherd, to Jesus, to God. We set boundaries, and those who do not fit our definitions become outsiders. Sometimes those definitions reflect our cultural understandings. That is the problem with Christian nationalism. Not only does it recognize our nation as especially chosen by God (though God’s people are found in the church, not in any one particular nation), but It defines belonging by conformity to a given set of cultural norms, primarily white; those who do not fit are coerced to conform or are otherwise treated as second class or less than, and unable to fully belong. Just as the Pharisees’ response to the man born blind, Christian nationalism excludes people, leading to injustice, racial inequality, and demonization of immigrants. This is not what the church is called to support or follow.

“I have other sheep” calls us to recognize that we do not have to be all alike. It is not culture that defines the flock, the people of God. It is not nationality that defines the people of God. It is not even correct theology that defines the people of God. It is the relationship of trust, loyalty, commitment and most of all, love, God’s love proclaimed and practiced by Jesus’ followers, that defines the people of God. John 13 verse 35 reports that Jesus proclaimed, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Meda Stamper, a minister of the Presbyterian Church who has also served the United Reformed Church of England, writes this about the “other sheep.” “The ‘other sheep’ of John 10:16 leave the door open to the readers/hearers of the Gospel and also warn against any kind of exclusive claim on the door – shepherd Jesus. Deciding who is in and who is out is really, this suggests, not the business of the sheep and is a mystery to them. We sheep-folk are told only to cleave to Jesus, to love, and to testify, as Jesus makes explicit in later chapters of John…”

When I look at our church, First Mennonite Primera Iglesia Menonita, when I look at our regional conference Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference with its diversity, when I look at our denomination Mennonite Church USA, and Mennonite World Conference, when I look at these I rejoice in the diversity and the many cultures and nationalities that are represented.

We come from many places. We face a variety of challenges. Some of us live with the daily threat of violence. Some of us live in comparative safety. Some of us have much and some of us have little. Some of us speak Spanish, or Korean, or Zulu, or any of a number of other languages. Our diversity both challenges and enriches us.

We have all been called by name. We have all been called to walk with our neighbors, whether they are refugees fleeing violence and suffering, or the ill or injured, or the lonely, the homeless, the needy. We learn from each other as we share our experiences of following Jesus in our various settings.

Together we are a mosaic, a beautiful picture of the people of God, called by name into relationship with each other and with our Creator. It is as we live this out in our communities, wherever they are, that we become a visible communion of faith, shining the light of God’s love to those around us, one flock, following one shepherd, Jesus our Lord.

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