

Other Sheep

Even though very few of us have spent much time around sheep or shepherds, I suspect that all of us here this morning feel that we have at least a basic understanding of the use of sheep and shepherds as metaphors for God's people and our relationship with our Creator and with Jesus. It is an oft-used metaphor in our Scriptures, not surprisingly so since they originated in a culture that was rooted in a nomadic, herding lifestyle and that continued to be primarily agrarian right through the time of the New Testament. The clarity of the language in such passages as the 23rd Psalm, perhaps the most-loved chapter in our whole Bible, has caused us to appropriate the sheep and shepherd metaphor deep into our own understandings of life lived in relationship to God, even though we have no (or, at least, very little) practical experience of the metaphor's source.

So, I don't want to spend the time on this busy morning to explicate much of the deep meaning of the metaphor, of what it means to call the Eternal One our Shepherd or to grapple with Jesus' bold statement, "I am the good shepherd," or even much of what it means for us to be the sheep of God's pasture and of Jesus' sheepfold. Instead, I want to talk this morning about Jesus' seemingly offhand and cryptic remark about "other sheep." Who was he talking about? How did his first disciples understand this comment? Who are the "other sheep" for us? And, perhaps most importantly, how does Jesus call us to interact with those aliens from another fold?

In addition to Biblical sources this morning and, in particular, the passages from the Gospel According to John and the First General Epistle of John that I read moments ago, I want to reference one very special non-canonical document. I don't know how the decision was reached to call what might very well have been the First Baptist Church of Lynnwood by the name Good Shepherd Baptist Church; perhaps it was seen as a shrewd marketing move. But the name has given this body of believers a particular identity for 48 years now and, in seeking to interpret that identity to themselves and to the world, some group of our spiritual antecedents crafted the following statement which has guided the work of this church for many years. As you listen to what I hope are familiar words, consider their connection to Jesus' statement about other sheep and to John's definition of and call to love: "Our goal is to become a supportive, growing Christian community that reaches out in a spirit of love. We welcome the open sharing of a variety of viewpoints (including Biblical interpretations) and Christian expression at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. While accepting diversity of views, we affirm a deeper unity. This unity we seek is characterized by a spirit of unconditional love extended toward all persons as members of a common and valued humanity with respect for the dignity of each individual as an unduplicated child of God."

As we consider the meaning for us of the phrase "other sheep," it is of course important to start with how Jesus' remark would have been heard by those who heard it first and to draw on the resonance that the Good Shepherd metaphor had for them. Some of you may remember that when we celebrated the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity earlier this year, we looked at Ezekiel's prophecy of the stick broken in two and then rejoined, a prophecy of the restoration of the sundered kingdoms of Judah and Israel into one people of God once again. That prophecy ends, "My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd." At the very least, Jesus' disciples would have understood that he was speaking of the already dispersed Jewish people and possibly of their despised cousins, the Samaritans, as his broader flock, all of whom would be called together again. But the Scriptural witness to the extent of God's loving plan goes much broader. In one of Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah, in Isaiah 11, he says, "On

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that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.” And speaking of God’s Suffering Servant, in prophecies the Church came to associate with Jesus, Isaiah 49:6 says, “(God) says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.””

The scope of the kingdom of the Good Shepherd, the Beloved Community, is to be all peoples of the earth. And lest there be any doubt that Jesus had this breadth of vision in mind, we should remember that John’s Gospel records Jesus as saying of his upcoming crucifixion, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” His disciples, after a little fumbling, embraced this vision, taking their witness of Jesus from Jerusalem, throughout Judaea, into Samaria and to the very ends of the earth; teaching and baptizing not only their fellow Jews but Gentiles as well, embracing as sisters and brothers those with whom previously they would not have even shared a meal.

Of course, Jesus’ vision extended beyond his earthly lifespan. The Kingdom of God was inaugurated in the Christ-event but it has not yet come to fulfillment. The Beloved Community began to be gathered by Jesus but the mission of its continued formation has been left for the Body of Christ, the Church in all its variety, to complete. In the words of Sr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, “we are not only sheep who hear our Good Shepherd’s voice, but we also are to become shepherds ourselves. Transformed from sheep to shepherd, we take up the life he has laid down.” That is why we say that we as Good Shepherd Baptist Church are to “(reach) out in a spirit of love.”

So, to whom are we to reach out in following the call of Jesus and the goal that we have set for ourselves? Are we to act lovingly to everyone? Are there those who are beyond or beneath our reach? I’ve had a few experiences in the last week or so that have caused me to reflect on these questions. It may be, in fact it is likely, that you all are far beyond me on some of these points but I share them for our mutual encouragement to love unrestrictedly and sacrificially, heeding our own commitment to “(accept a) diversity of views, (to) affirm a deeper unity,” to extend “unconditional love... toward all persons as members of a common and valued humanity with respect for the dignity of each individual as an unduplicated child of God,” and to do all this not only “in word or speech, but in truth and action,” ready even “to lay down our lives for one another.”

This past week, I received invitations to two very different events, both regarding the appropriate relationship of Christians to Muslims. The first event, on Tuesday, was a teleconference of pastors from all over the United States. I’d actually been receiving invitations to this event for some time – by mail, by e-mail, and even by automated phone call. It was a follow-up event to the broad distribution of a DVD called “Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West.” Have any of you seen it? 28 million copies have been distributed by mail and in newspapers by a group called the Clarion Fund. I’ve not taken the time to watch it but I can tell you that its widely discussed premise is that the violent radical Islamicists responsible for the 9/11 attacks and other atrocities represent the majority of Muslims and that Americans are to be wary of anyone who professes the faith of Mohammad.

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The other event to which I was invited was on Friday at Seattle First Baptist Church. Seattle First has organized this weekend “A Three-Faith Sabbath,” which has included Muslim prayers on Friday at noon, a *Shabbat* service on Friday evening at Bet Alef Synagogue in Bellevue and a worship service at Seattle First today jointly led by our friend Cathy Fransson, Don Mackenzie, the retired pastor of University Congregational Church, Rabbi Ted Falcon of Bet Alef, and Sheikh Jamal Rahman, a Sufi Muslim minister. Obviously, the intent and tone of the two events could not be more different. At which event, I wonder, could Jesus’ words about other sheep have been quoted? Although our Muslim sisters and brothers do not agree with us that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, they nevertheless revere him as a prophet and the teachings of the one they call the ultimate prophet, Mohammad, are rooted in the idea of submission, *islam*, to none other than the God of Abraham. It is a perhaps meaningless quirk of one of our Scripture verses this morning, I John 3:23, that of all the times in the Johannine literature that the phrase “believe in the name of Jesus Christ” is used, in this verse alone the preposition is missing. Literally translated, it is “believe the name Jesus.” Believe, in other words, the meaning of the name Jesus, or *Yeshua*: God is our Salvation. That, it seems to me, is the belief of all three Abrahamic faiths, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Are the Muslims not also the sheep of Jesus, simply from another fold?

It’s easier for us, or at least for me, to feel good about our “fellow sheep” relationship with Christians in other denominations. After all, a good chunk of this congregation has been gathered from different traditions, so it’s pretty pointless to insist on some sort of “Baptist purity.” Quite to the contrary, our Vision for Good Shepherd Baptist Church includes the idea of being “actively engaged in ecumenical activities.” But sometimes even that seemingly settled bit of business gets put to the question. Lynn Melby and I are working with the Church Council of Greater Seattle on their strategic planning process and at least twice in recent weeks the question has arisen, “Do we really want to invite *those* Christians to our table,” usually meaning those whose theology and beliefs are far more conservative than the generally moderate to liberal philosophy that dominates the Council. I’ve been quick in that forum to insist upon the inclusion of all viewpoints but it has caused me to ask myself, have I always been ready to embrace my brothers or sisters in Christ who disagree with me in interpretation of our shared mission? I believe we must be careful, my friends, to take care to live up to the words we proclaim: “We welcome the open sharing of a variety of viewpoints (including Biblical interpretations) and Christian expression at Good Shepherd Baptist Church.” We must be sure to hear all views and to honor those who hold them for none of us can know the whole mind of God, none of us can hold all the truth. We must learn from each other with open hearts and encourage each other as we seek to live out our calling as shepherds in the world.

I think this is especially important in view of another group of Jesus’ “other sheep.” So many of our neighbors are now describing themselves as “Spiritual but not Religious.” These folks should be, could be most open to our message of a Spirit-filled life, love of God and neighbor and service to “the least of these.” But too often, they are unable to hear our message because they have been “turned off” by the hateful, divisive words and actions of other Christians, or perhaps even from us. It is up to us to be true shepherds to these seekers, to show them, “not in word or speech, but in truth and action” what the love of Jesus has meant in our lives. That means being willing to forgive all wrongs, even at the expense of sacrificing our pride in being right. It means embracing those who are strange, different than us, even though it is the most

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natural thing in the world to shy away from them, to treat them with fear rather than with love. We should remember the truth taught by Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, who writes, “the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger.’”

My brothers and sisters, we are called collectively to take up Jesus’ mantle to be not only the Shepherd of Israel but to be the Good Shepherd for the “other sheep, not of this fold.” In a moment, we will celebrate our unity in the Lord, remembering that in his death and resurrection, symbolized by this bread and this juice, that we are joined together in a Holy Communion with each other and with our Creator, through the love of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. But we must also remember, as we take the bread and drink the fruit of the grape, that we are called to extend God’s love and our unity to all God’s sheep, no matter how different they may look or act or speak or worship. For we, also, “Gentiles by birth... were at (one) time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus (we) who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Thanks be to God.