

Sermon  
Easter 4B 2024  
John 10:11-18

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, so named because on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter we always hear from John 10, the Chapter of shepherds and sheep. Today's selection is my favorite of the three, and one of my favorite passages in John. Not only is this one of the selections for funerals, but it has a very inclusive tone to it.

This particular passage is all about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He will not run away when faced with death. Instead, he will actually die to protect his sheep – us. This bears out in his willingness to die on behalf of us. He died for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world; and by his death he took away death. He knows his sheep precisely because he is the good shepherd. He feeds them, cares for them, and protects them. And because he knows them in this way, the sheep – us – also know him.

This image of sheep and shepherd was certainly familiar to the people Jesus was addressing. The prophet Ezekiel likened the kings of Israel to bad shepherds who neglected their flock. Those shepherds, the kings, oppressed their sheep. They fed themselves, not the sheep. They took the sheep's wool and left them naked. They did not strengthen the weak, they didn't heal the sick and injured, and they didn't search for the lost. Therefore, Ezekiel prophesies, the Lord God will become the good shepherd. He will find the lost, heal the sick and injured, and feed the hungry. And now both the Pharisees and us hear Jesus say he is the good shepherd.

We are also familiar with these images of shepherds and sheep. Shepherds were the first people to see the infant Jesus in the manger. Priests and bishops are seen as shepherds of the flock. A bishop's crozier is modeled on the shepherd's staff – to protect, guide, and defend. And in this part of the country, you are all familiar with sheep and shepherds.

One of the things some people pull from this passage is an exclusionary view of Christ and Christians. "I know my own and my own know me," can be seen as a way of saying, "Christ knows those who have been saved and only those who are saved know Christ." Extrapolated out, of course, is a belief that only Christians (and often only the right Christians) are saved; all others are outside the protection of the flock.

But Jesus goes on to say, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.” Early interpreters, people like Augustine and Theodore of Mopsuestia, pointed out that this statement had to do with Judaism and Christianity. Since Jesus is talking to Pharisees, they are not wrong. The new movement of Jesus were those sheep the Pharisees didn’t know about. Two thousand years later, Christianity is now the established religion that Jesus is talking to, and we are being reminded that Jesus has other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

I can’t tell you who those other unknown sheep are, but I can tell you how we should approach this.

The first thing we can do is to recognize that people we may not approve of can be called by Jesus. Whether that’s due to differing theologies, different status, different abilities, different class, these are those other sheep that don’t belong to this fold. We are not trying to convert everyone to become Episcopalians – although that might be nice. We are simply trying to lead by example and proclaim the good news of God as exemplified in and through Jesus Christ.

The second thing to remember, and this should be self-evident, is that Jesus is in charge, not us. If he’s telling us he has other sheep to bring into the fold, then it’s not our job to keep them out. It is not our job to serve as gatekeepers in an effort to protect what we have, or to create a litmus test as to who belongs to Christ.

This is not to say we don’t have expectations and guidelines, because we do. We are Trinitarian. We have a baptismal covenant we try to live into. We won’t tolerate hate speech or abusive behavior. And these are those people for whom the Episcopal church isn’t a good fit – because of liturgy, or theology, or our acceptance of those whom society shuns. But that’s different than trying to be gatekeepers.

This passage also speaks to the mission of the Church. According to the Catechism, what is the mission of the Church? The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ (BCP 855). This sounds a lot like what Jesus has to say today: I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold – All people. So there will be one flock – restore to unity; one shepherd – in Christ.

Getting everyone to become an Episcopalian isn't the goal. Guarding the gates of heaven or the doors of the Church to protect it from the wrong people isn't the goal. The goal is to proclaim the good news of God in Christ in such a way that people feel welcome to explore the faith and examine their doubts. The goal is to live in such a way that people who are not part of this fold want to be part of the flock of Christ. The goal is to make the kingdom of God present on earth as it is in heaven. We do this through our actions and through our words.

As St. Teresa of Avila said, "Christ has no hands, eyes, or feet on earth but yours." I might also add, "He also has no mouth but yours."

We are both sheep and shepherd. Sheep in that we follow Christ's voice and try to live as he leads us. Shepherds in that we are now Christ's hands, feet, and mouth as we work to bring others into the one flock of Christ.

May we not only do the hard work of following Christ's voice ourselves while helping lead others into this flock, but may we also be willing to open our eyes to see those whom others see as not belonging, welcoming them into the flock.

Amen.