

Sermon on John 10:11-18  
Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2015  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

*“I Have Other Sheep”*

One of the most comforting images that people of faith have for Jesus is “the Good Shepherd”. It comes from an Old Testament image for God as Shepherd, most famously in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which we sang today: “the Lord is my shepherd.” But Jesus was a carpenter. Then he turned evangelist and prophet, with a mission to change the hearts and minds of all people about their relationship with God. So I wonder why Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, in the gospel today?

As always, we can find a clue in the context. In the chapter before this, chapter 9 of John’s gospel, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. This ticked off the Pharisees, because the blind man had been “exhibit A” of what they believed happens to people because of their sin: they suffer. This man was born blind. So who sinned, the disciples asked? The man or his parents? This is what the Pharisees and other religious folk were interested in (not in the well-being of the man born blind). So they argued theology over what he had done, or what his parents had done, so that he was born blind. Kind of like what some people might do today, when something bad happens to somebody, like poverty, and they think: “what did they do to deserve this? It must be a judgment from God!”

But Jesus said, “No, nobody sinned here. He was born blind. Now you are going to see a great miracle of God’s power, through my faith in what God is able to do. So Jesus healed the man, and now the man could see perfectly; with 20-20 vision! The religious authorities couldn’t believe this, and went to his parents to find out whether the man had ever been blind at all. Scared to death of the authorities, they only admitted this was their son, but claimed not to know how he had received his sight at long last. “Go ask our son, not us,” they said. Long story short, they threw the man born blind out of the synagogue, because now that he could see, he thought the one who healed him (namely, Jesus) must be from God - if he could do such an amazing thing. So they cast him out. But when Jesus found him, he asked him if he believed, and the man worshiped Jesus. The man born blind now could see, and those who had always had their eyesight – like the Pharisees – now had been proven blind, because they could not see what the man who now believed could see! Still, the Pharisees could not admit to being blind – and now they were furious. And it only got worse, when Jesus changed the metaphor, to talk about sheep, shepherds, bandits and thieves.

For today we have heard how Jesus told the Pharisees on the very steps of Jerusalem's Temple how bandits and thieves who did not enter the sheepfold by the front gate did not really care about the sheep – only the shepherd truly did. The sheep know his voice, and only follow him. Thieves come only to kill and destroy the sheep, but the shepherd comes “that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The shepherd was Jesus himself. Jesus said, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand....sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away...for he doesn't care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, I know my own and my own know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep...”* People like the man born blind. And everyone else.

The Pharisees steamed and fumed at this great blasphemy on the steps of the Temple – Jesus calling himself the Good Shepherd, the image of God himself, so familiar to them from the psalms. It was too much for them, and they plotted to have him killed, to fulfill his own prophecy. But we in the Church today take great comfort in these words of our Lord, for in Jesus, we find our shepherd, who gave his life for us. But Jesus took his words even farther than we could ever imagine. For 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.”* Jesus came not only “for us”, but to give life to the whole world – to all who have ever been left out or excluded (like the blind man, the lepers, and other outcasts).

In these days of declining worship attendance and church membership, we in the church are well aware that there are many who are not of this flock. Obviously, there are those who worship God from other faiths. There are so many people, young and old, who do not consider themselves Christians – those who are baptized and the many more who are not. There are many sheep who do not belong to his fold, just as Jesus said. Church people have given up on most of those outside, not knowing how to reach them, invite them, or even talk to them about matters of faith and holy things. But Jesus wants them all, to make them part of the flock also – not to be “just like us”, but for everyone to have life in him! We have this image that we, the “faithful”, are this sheepfold called the Church, surrounded by a cruel, sinful, and faithless world, while Jesus protects us like a shepherd guarding sheep. But we forget that Jesus only sees one flock, made up of all the sheep inside and outside the fold – one human race of people for whom Jesus died, in order to give everyone life – every child of God - and have it abundantly!

So this is the main point that I take from the gospel today: the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd isn't only about comforting and protecting the sheep already inside the fold from the dangers outside. It's even more so about Jesus calling us to go outside the flock to seek those other sheep – both to bring them

inside the greater fold of God's embrace, *and* to make the world outside the church more equitable, more safe, less violent, and more just. It's not about making everybody "Lutherans" – or even Christians" – but God in Christ calling out to the whole world, to embrace us all with love.

Of course, we recognize today that there are those outside the fold who aren't necessarily trying to get in to the Church – but they would very much like to know a shepherd – a God who cares! They are the curious and the not so curious. Seekers....and inquirers.....but who are they? Who are the people who are outside, not of this flock? Some are those who know the story of Jesus – they have heard it all before, but perhaps rejected it, or have forgotten its true point. Or they may have moved away from the church, and have not yet found another one, or maybe stopped looking. Some have married someone of another faith. Some were baptized, but were never brought to the church by their parents. There are those who "graduated" from confirmation or high school, and never returned. There are immigrants from Asia, Africa, South America who have come to St. Paul since 1975 – or since 2010. There are those who have not yet heard the good news of Jesus, or who have heard it all before and didn't find that it was "for them". There are also those who were rejected by the Church, or other Christians, left out or excluded because of their race, their gender, or sexual orientation, much like the man born blind who was excluded because of his perceived "sins". Are these the "other sheep" that Jesus is talking about, for whom he would leave the sheepfold to seek and to save, to make us all one flock?

It's not easy work, to go outside, seeking lost sheep. Jesus died for this. For us, going outside the comfort of the sheepfold can be dangerous and scary. It is also counter-intuitive for human beings, for us to leave what we know, what we find comfortable, for the sake of others goes against human nature. But this is why Jesus came, to seek and save the lost, to give his own life to give life to the world.

So what of our sheepfold, the Church, the Body of Christ which Jesus has formed of us? 125 years ago the congregation of Redeemer was founded, and 105 years ago this church building was constructed, to be a place of worship, where the good news of Jesus Christ would be preached and taught. There are strong walls on this place, and a firm foundation – but they weren't built to protect us from the world outside, or keep others locked out! For even sheepfolds aren't built for 24-hour, round-the-clock protection! As my brother David Tannen reminded me yesterday, sheep are only kept inside at night, but are led by their shepherds out into the world during the daytime, to find pasture. So we in this Church are sent out by our Shepherd, to seek pasture ourselves, and to seek those other sheep. For there is a flock, a church, which we can not yet imagine! God is not done yet with God's work of reaching out with grace, mercy, and love, or to bring us together

even when we seem so divided as human beings. To us, becoming one flock must seem impossible, even unimaginable!

But not for God, who has even overcome death by raising Jesus from the dead! If God can raise the dead to life, then God can make our divided humanity one flock, gathered by the one who gave his life to make it so: Jesus Christ our Lord. As scripture says, *“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another...[So] little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”* For this is how we shall become one, through faith in God, following Jesus our shepherd, with love for each other. Love is the key. So faith, hope, and love abide – but the greatest of these is love.