

John 10: 11-18
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Confessions of a Sheep

I have a confession to make. I don't really care whether or not people are brought into this flock we call Christianity. As a pastor, that feels like a strikingly more risky thing to say than if I were a school bus driver. But now that I've pronounced it to you all, I might as well claim it boldly.

This evangelical fervor that has flavored our faith forever has never made any sense to me.

If God is God of all, why does it matter whether or not Susie or Sammy are a part of one club or another? Isn't God still God over them? And can't I trust that God will be at work in ways in their lives -just as God is at work in mine - that are far beyond my understanding?

Some might argue with me that with an approach like this I'm going to work myself out of a job. Perhaps. But that presumes that this faith speaks to no one. And that's not what I'm saying either. What I'm getting at is this sense that Christianity has been laden with for centuries, and that the United Methodist Church has enthusiastically taken up in the last decade. That as Christians we are about: Boldly Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Simply put, I just don't agree that this should be our driving focus. I have no interest in a faith that is fueled by a notion that we must not rest until all are a part of our flock - until all the world has joined our club. It feels arrogant and short-sighted. It seems to say that I don't need to listen and I don't need to be truly in relationship with another. That I only am supposed to see others as possible converts rather than as who they truly are in that moment. Frankly, I have no interest in making people in my image nor do I understand that to be my job as a Christian.

Jesus says in this passage from the gospel of John, "*I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep. I will lay down my life. I have other sheep that don't belong to this fold - I must lead them too, and they will hear my voice.*"

Jesus doesn't call *us* the good shepherds. That role is left entirely to him. No, in this passage we are simply the sheep. We're here in this fold, and Jesus has his eye out over this flock and over a whole bunch more as well.

Jesus, as the child of our sovereign God, is given, or claims, the role of the one who is watching out over all humanity: guiding, herding, rescuing, tending. Jesus claims this role in the gospel of John - including the sacrificial aspects of shepherding - of risking one's life in order to save the life of another. Of facing the elements in a harsh and unforgiving climate, and willingly forgoing the comfortable bed, warm cooked meals and a roof over his head.

Tough work, and I am glad that Jesus claims it for himself and is not laying that responsibility at our feet in this passage.

Since we're not the shepherd out there rounding up folks for the transformation of the world. That leaves us, friends, as the sheep.

On the surface of things, this doesn't sound like a very interesting part in things. But I think it speaks to the nature of our life together and how I hope that the spirit of God works in each of us.

We are the sheep and how we live together as a flock will determine the type of work that God will need to do within and around us. How we live our lives as sheep will say a lot to others about whether or not they want to heed the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Presumably we are here because we are intrigued by the voice of the Good Shepherd, we have heard what he calls to us and our hearts are moved and our own lives are transformed, and because of that, then our presence in these pews becomes a contract of sorts. A covenant, with that Good Shepherd that we indeed agree to be sheep of his flock.

As his sheep, our hearing is tuned in his direction. Our self-determination will be guided by his presence within and among us. Our personal interests will be engaged and subsumed by the commands called by the shepherd. Nipped in the heel by a couple of collie dogs here and there,

we will be drawn into Christian community - that is, community centered around this shepherd, Christ.

For while I do not claim the role of shepherd, I do claim that there is much to be gained by listening to the voice of the one who calls himself that. I am compelled by the challenges the example that shepherd makes on my life - how I spend my time, distribute my money, use my words, care for creation. I do believe that does have great power - for me and for any of us. And I pray that this kind of living is what speaks as our evangelism: how the flock moves according to the shepherd's voice.

“And then there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

I don't know what this will look like in the future of the world - I don't dare to foretell God's plans. But I recognize in this passage that the community of the gospel of John was focused on integrating Jew and Gentile - seeing themselves as one flock. Unexpectedly bridging a chasm that had been in place for centuries and that no one would have dreamed crossable a century earlier.

But, through the work of the Good Shepherd they found life in the flock that was expanded by his ministry.

Not all of their flock thought alike or looked alike. Some were circumcised and some were not. Some were kosher and some were not. Some practiced Christianity through Jewish prayers and some did not.

I trust that in that same radical, liberating way, the Good Shepherd moves among us today. Encouraging the sheep and herding them into safe, life-giving pastures. Perhaps not all in the same field, not all eating the same grain, not all of the same wool.

That is not ours to worry over. *Jesus* has claimed that role for himself. And we can be grateful for that.

So that we can hopefully, proudly, confidently live our lives as sheep. Welcoming those sheep who come to join this flock - Laurie and Brian.

We gather in this community to practice with one another the ways in which this flock is defined by God's love, grace and mercy. - the very words of the Shepherd to us each day. 'We practice making ink of love and letting our heart and intellect write a new story that has no end or limit'¹ because it is centered on the voice of our eternally shaping and creating God.

Amen.

¹ A quote from Guru Nanak, "Burn worldly love, rub the ashes and make ink of it, make the heart the pen, the intellect the writer, write that which has no end or limit."