

Easter 4, April 25, 2021

John 10 LFLC

I'll confess you right up front that when I sat down  
to write yet another sermon on "The Good Shepherd,"  
I cringed, moaned and whined, and  
and then put my computer to sleep, and went out for a walk.

And why, you ask? Why wouldn't it be an utter  
joy to write about the Good Shepherd?

Well, if you grew up in the Church, you, like me,  
might be carrying some shepherd baggage, too.

For example, Was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm the first Psalm you memorized as a child?  
Did you spend umpteen hours in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School  
making sheep out of toothpicks, cotton balls, and Elmer's glue?  
Or how about having to sing "I Just Wanna Be a Sheep, Baaa Baaa, Baaa,"  
dozens of times over your years as a child?

And did you ever stay around after the morning service  
in the church sanctuary or basement staring at that all-too-familiar  
painting of Jesus wearing flowing robes,  
with an adorable lamb perched on his shoulders,  
and wonder to yourself why God never swept down  
or sweeps down from heaven to cuddle you?

See, I find the Good Shepherd passages in John's Gospel difficult  
for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, the metaphor is so shopworn  
and its beauty buried under so much saccharine piety  
and Hallmark card sentiment that I can't even think about it  
without rolling my eyes.

At the same time, I'm also well aware of the fact that I have no real-life idea  
what Jesus was actually talking about when he describes himself  
and the whole scene in terms of shepherds, sheep,  
sheepfolds or pens, hired-hands and wolves.

Now, it is true that Jesus was an effective teacher  
because he used metaphors and images his audience could relate to.

So when he spoke of sheepfolds, vineyards, mustard seeds,  
and fishing nets, he wasn't spouting exotic stuff  
but was wielding the material of first-century peasant life in Palestine.

Me, though? I've never herded sheep or even been on a first-name basis  
with a real shepherd--although I have served congregations  
that had members who raised pigs or were dairy farmers.

And, I'm sure this comes as no surprise to any of you,  
but I've never fought a wolf in my life.

Oh, I did grow up visiting my grandparents' farm,  
but I never saw my grandfather, or grandmother either,  
drape baby animals over their clean, robed shoulders.  
In fact, what I remember is that, most of the time,  
the animals on their farm stank, and often,  
at the end of a long day in their midst, so did my grandparents.

So, how the Church has moved from the mud-stained hardships  
associated with honest-to-goodness raising and caring for animals  
to a manicured Jesus cuddling a lily-white lamb is beyond me.  
I mean, people around here can't even keep their dogs clean and dry  
after a morning walk in the rain or on the beach or on trails.

So, lily-white sheep out in the fields? Not a chance!

And what about this: I know that sheep are dumb and skittish;  
they wander until they are lost, get hurt easily,  
graze without ceasing and seemingly bicker for no decent reason.  
I also know they can be stupidly stubborn,  
and will follow any leader blindly.

So, along with Debie Thomas, I wonder how Jesus puts up with me, with us?  
As she puts it: "Does he fight loneliness, boredom and frustration  
when I ignore him in favor of greener pastures?  
And as he watches the dumb, stubborn things I do,  
does he hope against hope that I won't injure myself once more?  
It is true that he rescues me from death all the time  
but I, so often oblivious, resist his care and protection tooth and nail."

And this is me again: The more I read John 10 and Psalm 23,  
the scarier they sound because I'm always astonished  
at how much we fail to really “see” in them.

I mean, we read that the Psalmist's banqueting table  
is surrounded by his enemies. . .  
and that still waters and green pastures  
eventually lead to valleys of death.

And the reality is that as the Good Shepherd,  
Jesus lives at the edges of polite society.  
His life is perpetually in danger and, again and again,  
he faces the mockery of the priests—  
the ones who are supposed to be shepherds--  
but who consider his self-sacrificing attitudes and words to be absurd.

And, again, as Debie Thomas notes:  
“Because he's in it for the long haul with his flock,  
he not only frolics with lambs, but wrestles with wolves;  
not only tends the wounds of his beloved rams and ewes  
but buries them when their time comes.”

So maybe it is no great mystery why the Church has turned this Shepherd  
into a greeting card. . .because it's so hard to face who he really is. . .  
and, even more, to contemplate what he requires of us.  
"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 says the writer of 1 John in today's Second Reading.

And then, of course, writes David Lose, a Lutheran seminary president,  
there is that section in the middle of Jesus' discourse  
on being “the good shepherd” where he makes this bold assertion:  
That “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.  
And I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.  
So there will be one flock and one shepherd.”

I'm sure we have all noticed that verse. . .and, even more than just noticed it,  
struggled with it. . .with its theological implications.  
Well, what strikes Lose is that the import of this verse is, quite simply,  
that Jesus isn't done yet. . .isn't finished what he came to do.

Despite his healings and his preaching. . .  
 despite all that he had already done and planned to do,  
 Jesus isn't done yet. He still has more sheep to reach and gather--  
 sheep that are not in this fold and not in this flock.

And what that means, says David Lose, and say I:  
 What that means is that God isn't done yet, either--  
 something that matters a lot for at least two reasons:

First, in Lose's words: "God continues to call people from all walks of life,  
 from every nation on the face of the earth,  
 and from each and every generation across the 2000 years  
 since Jesus first uttered those words until today.  
 In fact, if that were not true, you and I would not have come to faith  
 and we certainly would not be giving our lives into the service of God."

"Second, the members who will one day constitute  
 or belong to Jesus' flock are beyond our imagining—  
 which means that there is a tremendous expansiveness or reach  
 to Jesus' statement here. . .and we do not know —  
 for neither Jesus nor John tells us—  
 just what are the limits are of the fold that Jesus describes."

All we know is that Jesus — and therefore God —  
 that neither of them are done yet."  
 Jesus is still calling, God is still searching,  
 and in time we will all be, as Jesus says,  
 one flock under one shepherd.

And I think it is this last point that is the most troublesome and comforting for me  
 because I know more and more people who are worried  
 about friends and family members who no longer go to church,  
 who don't necessarily identify as Christian anymore,  
 or who have married people of other faiths. . .  
 or, for that matter, have friends or family  
 who are followers or adherents of other faiths.

And so it is the message of v. 16 that stands out to me  
 where Jesus speaks of that "other flock." I mean, who are those sheep—  
 those on the outside who, one day, will be brought inside?

Could it be that the other sheep include the Gentiles that Jesus meets and heals?

Or the Samaritan woman. . . a religious outsider. . .

whom Jesus meets at a well and engages in

a rather interesting theological conversation about worship?

What about the tax collectors—the public sinners—he has dinner with?

And then there are the women who follow him?

That is definitely a “no-no” in that society and that time.

And then there are the lepers and the sick and injured

who look to him for help and find it.

Time and again Jesus welcomes into his fold

those whom his culture considers unclean and outside the margins.

Could they be those “others”?

And, when it comes to us, who are those “outside our flock/our fold”

who are hardest to love (1 John) and hardest to “lay down our lives” for?

Are they are those who have serious reservations

about joining any church at all, let alone ours,

because they have difficulty “signing on the dotted line”

in terms of what they are supposed to believe and confess. . .

or who they are permitted to fall in love with and marry. . .

or how they self-identify in terms of gender or pronouns. . .

or, these days especially, have different colour skin?

Could they be those “others”?

And, of course, there is that really difficult question and complex issue

about those from other religious traditions:

Are they part of God’s “other flock”. . . and, if so, how?

Daniel Clendenin notes that in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*,

compiled in 2001, the editor David Barrett

identifies 10,000 distinct religions,

150 of which have a million or more followers.

So is it reasonable, therefore, Clendenin asks,

to believe that Jesus is the only way to the only God,

and that the other 9,999 religions are false?

What's a Christian to think? How do we deal with that reality?

Well, he says that many people today, maybe even most,  
 favour some version of "pluralism" —that is, the belief  
 that no one religion can or should claim to be THE only religion  
 for all people and therefore superior to all others.

And, honestly, religious pluralism sounds and feels good.  
 It tries to capture the moral high ground,  
 and I've always wanted to subscribe to it. . .  
 but although I can try and do so in my heart,  
 I can't really do so in my head. . .because I don't think it's true.

After all, some religious views and practices  
 seem clearly false, harmful, and even despicable.  
 Cult leaders who sexually or otherwise use or take advantage  
 of women or children who belong to their cult  
 don't deserve religious parity with Mother Teresa.

In the same way, Aztec human sacrifice, Hindu widow-burning,  
 honour killing of young females,  
 putting babies to death simply because of their gender--  
 plus a long list of similar "religious convictions or actions"--  
 none of those should to be viewed as a true faith.

In other words, pluralism that *consistently* treats *all* religions as equally valid  
 comes at the unacceptably high price  
 of endorsing the demonic as well as the divine.  
 So, in truth, Clendinin concludes, most people do not  
 and should not believe that "all religions are true,"  
 because some religions are clearly false.

Similarly, he goes on to state that the claim that all religions  
 teach the same thing is silly because that is precisely what they do *not* do.  
 Now, it is fair to say that on a general level, one can document  
 broad similarities among many religions,  
 such as various renditions of the Golden Rule—  
 "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

But when you examine the historical and theological particulars of religions,  
 you discover drastic differences: Judaism, Christianity and Islam  
 are all famous for their "radical monotheism" and all teach  
 that their religion alone is right about the one true God.

On the other hand, Shintoism, Hinduism, and many African traditional religions  
 are polytheistic—that is, worship many gods. . .  
 while Buddhism is non-theistic—confesses no god--  
 and then, of course, there is atheism which denies the very existence of God.

As a result, according to Clendenin, two conclusions follow.

First, it is patronizing in the extreme to say that all religions  
 teach the same thing. . .and therefore we can and should  
 tell a Muslim or a followers of Bahai, for example,  
 that their beliefs are really no different than those of a Rastafarian.

And second, contradictory religious claims like the ones I've just mentioned  
 and others, might all be false. . .but they can't all be true.  
 Monotheism and polytheism, for example, can't both be right.

A rule of thumb in Biblical interpretation is to understand  
 the complex and ambiguous parts of Scripture  
 in the light of simple and straightforward passages.

And so, for Christians it's unthinkable that God  
 will treat any person of any time, place or religion unfairly.

Or to put it another way: As Christians, we are unqualified optimists  
 when it comes to the nature and character of God.

And so, while there are many things in the Bible that I don't understand,  
 I do have absolute confidence that God will treat every person  
 with perfect love. . .since God IS Love.

Thus, at the end of the day and at the end of this sermon,  
 I want to say that it's not really the parts of the Bible  
 that I don't understand that bother me,  
 such as the questions about religious pluralism.

It is more often the parts I do understand that bother me—  
 like the call to love God with my whole heart  
 and to love my neighbour as myself.

To wrap this up, let me say that while I don't think a sermon  
 is the best place or the right time to hash out the merits  
 of a universalist versus a particularist view of ultimate salvation,  
 I do believe we can say with confidence  
 that God is not done yet--  
 and that God works in ways beyond our wildest imaginations  
 to bring together one flock. . .and that Jesus Christ's mercy and grace  
 are for all. . .and will be for all. . .for all people and for all creation.

And should you ask what allows me the boldness to proclaim that  
 even when and even though I don't know for sure  
 the fate of the various people you and I are concerned about?

Well, it is just this: That *Jesus is the Good Shepherd*,  
 the one who laid down his life for the sheep – all the sheep! –  
 and who was raised to life once again as confirmation  
 and validation of his sacrifice and his promise—  
 his promise to bring those “other sheep” into his fold.

So, for me anyway, while we may not know all that God has in mind  
 for those who have followed different spiritual paths,  
 I nevertheless entrust them all to the mercy and grace  
 of the Good Shepherd. . .just as I entrust myself. . .  
 and all of you. . .and all those I love. . .  
 to that same mercy and grace.

Amen.

SDG