



“A PLACE FOR YOU...AND A PLACE FOR ALL”

John 10:11-18

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As I read this scripture throughout this past week, I kept thinking to myself, “I don’t know that I’ve known a shepherd in my life.” When Dawn and I lived in southwest Wisconsin, we had youth that went to our church who raised sheep from time to time, but I still didn’t really know a shepherd. We loved to pass the sheep farms in the spring because you could see the lambs jumping about in the fields. On the other hand, I don’t remember seeing their shepherds.

A few years ago, I bumped into a shepherd as I was hiking in northern Spain. He was walking with a large flock of sheep. In fact, there were so many that they spanned several yards on either side of the same path that I was walking. As we walked towards one another, I started to move out of the way so as not to startle his sheep, but before I knew it, I was surrounded by the flock which walked right around me as if I were a tree in the way. They stuck close to one another and walked right beside their shepherd, not matter what was in front of them. Intrigued as I was by the experience, I didn’t really get a chance to talk to their shepherd.

Growing up as a young boy on the east side of Detroit, however, I often traveled with my grandparents to spend our summer vacationing in middle Tennessee as we went to visit my great-grandmother and other extended family. There, in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains, this city boy first encountered a little taste of life on the farm.

While I never really knew a shepherd, Uncle Herman was a farmer from days gone by. My great-great uncle, to be precise, Uncle Herman always had a variety of animals on his farm. He had some chickens and hogs, too. He even raised some beautiful peacocks that loved to strut across his front yard. He even had a few goats on the hillside from time to time, but I don’t remember seeing any sheep during my time.

Uncle Herman lived in an old house he had built from logs that he had cut and hewn himself. It sat at a high point in the land between two bluffs that rose even higher up the surrounding hillsides. The fencing came right up to his yard and ran high up the bluffs on either side into the tree lines that surrounded his mountain home. There were a few barns and other outbuildings across the property, as well. I can still see the wood of those aged barns in my mind to this day.

While I don't remember Uncle Herman having any sheep, I do remember that he raised Angus cattle. Often, when we arrived on the farm, the cattle were nowhere to be seen. Summer in Tennessee can be hot and humid. Often, the cattle were taking cover in the shade of the trees far beyond our site. Beef cattle like Angus are a shy breed and they don't take much to being bothered by humans. When the city kids arrived at the farm, we wanted to see the animals. We wanted to get up close to the animals and experience life on the farm. While we didn't understand anything about cattle or any of the other animals, Uncle Herman was never one to disappoint us.

When it came feeding time, he'd round us all up as he walked up to the empty barn with some buckets of feed. Along the way, he'd look up the sides of the bluffs and simply call out, "OOOOOO. Sook. Sook. OOOOOO."

The first time he did it, we looked at Uncle Herman like he was crazy. What in the world was he saying? Before we knew it, however, we could feel the ground begin to move beneath our feet. Suddenly from the tree lines appeared a speck of black in the distance. One after another, the once invisible cattle poured out of the trees as they followed us to the barn for their meal. When Uncle Herman called out, they knew his voice and that his voice meant food.

Walking up to the barn, we discovered that Uncle Herman knew his cattle, as well. He knew if one was missing and often which one it was. I remember him commenting from time to time that one might be off giving birth and we'd see her soon when she was done. If he didn't see it quick enough, he'd go off looking for it.

I was always mesmerized at Uncle Herman's ability to call the cattle. How did he do that? Long after he went back into the house and the cattle returned to the fields, we'd stand at the fence line calling out, "Mooo. Suk. Suk. Mooo." Somehow our call was not the same. I couldn't bellow like him. The cattle never responded. They seemed to know the voice of the farmer. While I've not really known a shepherd, I knew a farmer, once...several years ago.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus refers to himself as the "good shepherd" which really means "model" or "true" as opposed to "good" in the sense of "good" versus "bad."¹ In doing so, Jesus makes the distinction between the shepherd and the hired hand. The hired hand runs when the wolf comes and allows the sheep to be attacked or scattered while the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The shepherd, however, cares for the sheep. The shepherd knows the sheep and the sheep know their shepherd.

In Israel at this time, as well as in other parts of the world even today, you might find pens for animals, especially in communal grazing lands. I saw a few in Spain as I hiked the countryside in the north a few years ago. These pens are often wooden fences that have an opening where a gate should be located. The first time I saw one I was captivated at how you might keep the animals contained. Without a gate, how do you keep the sheep in the pen? Perhaps the text itself might give us some insight. If we read the verses just before our lesson today, we would also hear Jesus refers to himself as the "gate for the sheep."²

In just a few brief verses, Jesus refers to himself as both the shepherd and the gate. As the shepherd, he lays down his life for the sheep.³ It would be easy for us to read this and think simply that Jesus must be speaking about his death and resurrection when he talks about laying down and taking up his life again. On the other hand, the text may be moving us to deeper levels of understanding.

I've heard it said that in Israel and other parts of the world where you might find these gateless pens for sheep, the shepherd would simply lay across the opening of the pen to serve as a gate for the sheep. Nothing gets in at the sheep without going through the shepherd first. So, in this sense, the shepherd quite literally lays down his or her life, his or her body, to serve as a gate for the sheep; to protect the sheep.

Gail R. O'Day in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary notes that the shepherd, Jesus, lays down his life for "the" sheep, not just "my" sheep. In the shepherd's eyes, all the sheep are important.⁴

Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."⁵ O'Day points out that the distinctive quality of being sheep is that the sheep know the shepherd (Jesus). What differentiates these creatures as sheep is their relationship with the shepherd and their understanding that the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. What distinguishes the shepherd from any imposter is the relationship that the shepherd shares with God ("the Father") and the sheep.⁶ The important qualification for being sheep is knowing the voice of the shepherd.

It's at this point that Jesus says, "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."⁷

What a minute, Jesus. There are other sheep? Who are they? Where are they? Do they look like the sheep that are already in the flock? Jesus seems intent on restoring the community of faith which is bigger than his hearers may have realized. He's committed to bringing the sheep together.

Over this past year, as we have journeyed through our FORWARD visioning process at Birmingham and Berkley First, we've been reminded time and time again that the blessed community that God invites us to is bigger than we often think of it. We've realized that part of what makes being the body of Christ so wonderful is the beautiful diversity that God intends for all of us. When we look out and see that diversity in the body of Christ, we are able to get a better glimpse of who God is. When others discover God's gift of diversity among us, they are better able to see how they, too, reflect the divine image of love.

Over the past four weeks, we've been using a bulletin cover that, in so many ways, reflects what many might see as a representation of diversity. We've been talking about how at Birmingham and Berkley First we want you to know that there's a place for you on the team here; there's a place for you to grow here; and there's a place for you to serve here. As we look at the bulletin cover, you might notice that those are not necessarily familiar faces from our congregation, but rather a collage of inspiration for who God is calling us to be as a community.

The other day, however, one of our staff members pointed out how this picture, in all of its diversity, might still be lacking something. She noted how the people on the page look like all is going well in their lives and invited us to think about whether someone struggling would find a place among the photos on the page. The center is left blank so that we might find ourselves among the others, but the question remains, how do we make sure that there is not only a place for us, but a place for all?

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.”⁸ Jesus, the good shepherd, ensures that there is a place for all within the fold. How might we do that, too?

At Birmingham and Berkley First, we’re committed to making sure that there is a place for you and a place for all. It’s part of the reason we believe that multi-site ministry helps us to more accurately reflect the diversity God intends for our world. As we bring the community of faith together across our campuses, we know that we won’t all look, think, or act alike. Yet, the key to being sheep is that the sheep know the shepherd. Together, we sheep follow the shepherd. We listen for the voice of the shepherd that unites us even when we come from different folds that view life, faith, and even culture differently. Across our campuses, worship may look different, but we remain united as we listen for the voice of the shepherd. Congregations may look different, but we are a part of the same church, growing in our relationship with others as we extend our hands through multi-site ministry.

This week, as we once again see the brokenness of extreme partisan divide throughout the nation, as well as the brokenness of the very systems and people that ought to protect those who are most vulnerable and their stories, it can become very easy for us to write off the sheep who do not look like they belong to our fold; to our flock. The good shepherd, however, lays down his life for the sheep—for every last one, those within and those outside of the fold. He lays down his life and takes it up again.

Today, as we gather together for Choir Dedication Sunday, I hope you heard the words of the Chancel Choir as they sang *For Everyone Born* as their offertory. It’s one of those songs that you sing, longing for the day that it will be lived and true. Listen again to the first stanza and the refrain:

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead,
and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!⁹

Perhaps you’ve never met a shepherd, but when we work to make room at the table, I wonder if we might be hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd who reaches out, bringing all into the fold.

¹ O'Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX., ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 672.

² John 10:7, NRSV.

³ John 10:11, NRSV.

⁴ O'Day, 673.

⁵ John 10:14-15, NRSV.

⁶ O'Day, 672-3.

⁷ John 10:16, NRSV.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.hopecublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw342.aspx>