



Christ United Methodist Church

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Date: April 22, 2018

Sermon: Inviting Other Sheep

Text: John 10:11-18

Speaker: Pastor Cheryl Arnold

According to the Christian year, we're still in the Easter season. But from now through Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, our assigned lectionary readings will thrust us back into the weeks preceding Jesus death.

And it's not just this year. Every year on this 4th Sunday of Easter, aka Good Shepherd Sunday, our scripture choices always include Psalm 23—which you heard in our Call to Worship. And the gospel reading is always from the 10th chapter of John's gospel, and it's always about sheep.

In Year A we read that Jesus is the gate to the sheep pen; in Year B we read that Jesus is the Good Shepherd to the sheep; and in Year C we read that Jesus tells the Pharisees they aren't his sheep.

But because these passages are plucked of context, I think it's important to remember that the story in John 10 actually begins in the previous chapter,

John 9—which is the story of the man born blind.

Quick review. Jesus heals the blind man's sight...on the Sabbath...and then disappears. Through repeated questioning, the healed man gradually comes to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Then the Pharisees throw the man out of the synagogue, arguing that Jesus can't possibly be of God because he broke Sabbath law,. Jesus hears about it, finds the man, cares for him...and then, in Chapter 9's last verses, takes on the Pharisees.

The story finally ends in John 10, verse 21, where someone says of Jesus: "These aren't the words of someone who has a demon. Can a demon heal the eyes of people who are born blind?"

One thing we can ask of today's text is, why do the John 10 readings appear in the season of Easter? Well, if I only look at today's text, I see that Jesus frequently says, "I give up my life for the sheep." Jesus gave up his life for us! That's certainly a part of the Easter message worth celebrating!

But knowing that Jesus' entire dialogue here is challenging the Pharisees for kicking someone out of their community, I keep coming back to verse 16, which Christians have found troubling for nearly 2,000 years.

This is where Jesus says, "I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd."

Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees for acting like they're the ones who know—absolutely know—who is in God's flock, and who is out. Which makes me wonder if at least

part of why we read this passage during Easter has to do with how we share the good news of Christ's resurrection.

So...as we did at Wednesday's Holy Communion gathering, let's ask ourselves the obvious question: Who are the sheep in today's passage. And just as importantly, who are the other sheep?

When we read today's text, as Christians, it can seem like Jesus words apply to us. We're the sheep! And other Christians are the other sheep! And perhaps the message is that we shouldn't fret when the Methodists and the Baptists and the Lutherans and the Catholics can't agree because we're all in the same flock.

But historically, that's a questionable interpretation. Why? Because everyone in the story is Jewish. In Jesus' lifetime, Christianity didn't exist yet, let alone different denominations.

So here are the 3 different viewpoints I found while researching this text. Now you don't have to agree with them, but you should know what they are.

Some scholars believe that the "sheep" Jesus spoke of were the Jews living in Judea—and that the "other sheep" were the so-called "lost tribes" of Israel. But to me, that makes little sense because John's gospel repeatedly tells us how God so loved the world—and that Jesus came to save the world—not just the Jews.

Most scholars believe that when John wrote this passage, the "sheep" were the Jews--all of the Jews--and the "other sheep" were the Gentiles—the non-Jews. If true, that means that the believers in John's community

and all Christians ever since are the “other sheep!” We’re not in the same pen as the Jews who followed Jesus...but we hear and we follow the same voice.

A few scholars take this Jew-Gentile perspective even further, suggesting that Jesus’ “other sheep” might be people who follow any religion besides Judaism. Isn’t that heresy! Ummm...not really.

The great Christian theologian and author CS Lewis touches on this theology in his so-called children’s books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

If you’re familiar with *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you know that these stories follow the adventures of some lucky children and a few adults who go back and forth between our world and Narnia, where trees dance, animals talk, and the land’s rightful ruler is Aslan, the lion King who represents Christ.

If you read through the whole series, in the 7th and final book, called *The Last Battle*, Aslan welcomes a young man named Emeth into his kingdom when the world ends.

No one is happier, or more surprised by this than Emeth—because he was from the country of Calormen. Emeth fought the Narnians and worshiped the Calormene god Tash all his life. But as Aslan explains, because Emeth had devoted himself to perfectly loving and serving his god, he was actually worshiping Aslan.

To put that theology into more familiar terms that are absolutely rooted in our Old and New Testaments, CS Lewis is showing us that God looks at our hearts.

Whether we like it or not, the truth is that we don't get to decide who's in the flock. That's not our job. As the Casting Crown's song "We Are the Body" says:

Jesus paid much too high a price
for us to pick and choose
who should come.

I believe that as Easter people, our job is to live like Jesus lived, loving God and loving all of God's children—especially those we see as The Other—so that people are drawn toward the Shepherd, not scared away.

In these days when we're so quick to draw lines about who's in and who's out—on any issue—today's gospel reminds me that the Pharisees were absolutely certain they had all the right answers. They excluded the formerly blind man from their community—their whole society—because now, after being miraculously healed by Jesus, his beliefs didn't match up with theirs. But John's Jesus tells them that they're wrong.

And that should give us pause because, we can be wrong too. It's a sad fact that too often, Christians who are very concerned with doing the right thing, and who think they are doing the right thing, do a better job keeping people out of the flock than they do in welcoming people into it.

Two weekends ago I was at Course of Study, which is how licensed local pastors in the UM church get their seminary training without going full-time to seminary. Currently I'm in my 13th class—only 7 more to go if I pass "John Wesley and Early Methodism."

My professor is Glen Messer, a Wesleyan scholar from Boston University who served from 2010 to 2016 on the Global Board and Society's United Methodist's Committee on Ecumenicalism—which gives him an interesting perspective on schisms in the church and between denominations.

As we introduced ourselves Friday, people shared powerful, heart-warming stories about how they came to Christ, or how their lives have taken on new meaning within the church as they live out their vocation as pastors. But what I remember most was the story about Dan.

As a young man, Dan had been in several unhealthy relationships and was trying to get his life back together—and he finally found a church where he felt like he belonged.

But on his third Sunday, an usher took him aside and told him not to come back unless he was wearing something besides jeans and a t-shirt. Dan didn't set foot in any church for 24 years.

Perhaps you've heard it said that your life may be the only Bible some people read? The Bible has some nasty stuff in it. Let's be sure our lives are illustrating the parts about Jesus, so people don't want to permanently close The Book.

Face it, most people practice the religion that's practiced around them. We may choose a denomination, or a specific church because we grew up in it, or because someone invited us to attend. And often, if we start

building meaningful relationships there we stay...and if we don't, we leave.

Since we're all here by God's grace, shouldn't we treat others with that same grace?

Throughout the weekend, my professor made comments like, "What if the Christian life is less about getting it right, and more about learning from those whom we think are wrong? What if our most important witness is really about loving one another in spite of our differences in belief, in practice, and in opinion? Isn't there something holy about living in a community where we seriously respect other people's beliefs without relinquishing our own?"

As I think about that weekend, and the gracious way that Glen interacted with a roomfull of recovering Catholics, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Universalist Unitarians, Lutherans, and yes, recovering United Methodists, and as watched my peers respond, I have to believe that he may be on to something—how we live, how we treat others is what will ultimately attract people to Christ.

I may be wrong. He may be wrong. But for God's sake, and for the sake of the gospel, I hope you'll be willing to join me and at least give it a try.

Let's pray...

Loving God, we thank you for the ways you reveal yourself to us—through holy scripture, through Jesus, through your church, through one another, and through the world. Help us live in ways that bring honor and glory to you.

Teach us humility by reminding us that our thoughts are not your thoughts, our ways are not your ways. Forgive us for judging others. Help us show compassion and love to those who need to know you, and to those who think they already know everything about you.

Amen.