

Jesus' "other sheep"

John 10:11-16

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

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After the death of Jesus, the early church faced the formidable task of figuring out its relationship, first, with other Jews and then with the vastly larger Gentile, which is to say, "pagan," world. This is a theme that runs through the entire New Testament, connecting, in one way or another, every book.

If this task were not formidable enough, in a post-resurrection appearance Jesus sprang a surprise on his already bewildered disciples. The surprise has ramifications to our own day.

Our Gospel reading is John 10:11-16.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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.'

*This is the Gospel of grace.
Thanks be to God.*

Our text is the conclusion to a story that takes a chapter and a half in John's Gospel to tell. A brief summary will have to suffice.

Jesus and his disciples had just left the temple in Jerusalem when they spotted a man who had been born blind. Not known for their empathetic qualities, the disciples saw the man's condition as an opportunity – to talk theology. "Who sinned," they asked, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus, on the other hand, was moved with compassion for the man. He didn't ask if the man believed in God or if he believed that he, Jesus, was the Messiah. He didn't even ask if the man wanted to receive his sight. Jesus simply reached down, put some dirt in his hand, spat on it, made a muddy paste of it and put it on the man's eyes. Then he told him to go wash his face. When the man did so, for the first time in his life he could see.

There are a couple more scenes in this story, but we don't need to deal with them. Ultimately, Jesus was challenged by some religious leaders because this had taken place on the Sabbath which was controversial. Drawing on an ordinary occupation, shepherding, he contrasted the owners of the flock with workers who were hired to tend the sheep.

Then Jesus said, in what seems like an unrelated comment, “*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.*” I wish the writer had focused on the reaction of his disciples. Did their heads jerk up? Did their brows wrinkle and eyes get bigger?

“What did he say? Other sheep? He has other sheep? We’re not the only ones? Who is he talking about?”

Jesus had always been a bit loose about such matters and that didn’t set well with some of his closest disciples. They would have preferred that he be a bit tighter, organizationally speaking. For example, there was the time they came to him complaining about a man who was casting out demons in his name. The problem was that they didn’t know anything about him. He could be some kind of nut who might bring bad publicity to the ministry. They wanted Jesus to give them permission to tell the man to cease and desist until they had time to vet him properly. Background checks and all that.

In other words, they wanted to be gatekeepers to the ministry of Jesus. They would give his ministry some form, structure, organization. How about some membership requirements? A doctrinal checklist. Maybe even a constitution and by-laws.

They must have been disappointed by Jesus’ laid back, laissez fair response, which I imagine was accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders: “Those who aren’t against us must be for us. He’s bringing peace to troubled minds, for crying out loud, and you want to shut him down so you can, what, check his credentials? Really? Leave the poor man alone.”

Reading the Gospels, you get the impression that Jesus’ ministry was extemporaneous. Like the day he was walking down the road and a Roman centurion approached him and told him that his daughter was home seriously ill but if Jesus would simply say the word, she would be healed. Jesus told him to go home because his daughter was fine. Jesus said of the centurion, “I haven’t seen such faith in all of Israel?” The guy was a card-carrying pagan.

It’s hard to figure out Jesus’ evangelistic method, if he had one. The pathways of his ministry are strewn with people who resist easy categorization.

Consider the remarkably dogged mother of a mentally ill (demon possessed) child. When Jesus came to her village in Gentile territory, she ran into the streets yelling at him, begging him to heal her daughter. At first Jesus didn’t respond. He just kept on walking. When he finally spoke, it sounded harsh. He told her that he had come to minister to his own people, the house of Israel. By implication, not to her daughter. “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and give it to the dogs,” he said. By now she was kneeling at his feet, begging, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” That’s what stopped Jesus. “Woman,” he said, “great is your faith. Let it be done to you as you request.” (Matthew 15:21-28)

What box do we put her in? Was she “saved”? Was she now a Christian?

Jesus’ followers – in contrast to Jesus -- were into organizational charts and doctrinal purity.

Do you know the first thing the disciples did after Jesus died, sequestered in the upper room in Jerusalem? Jesus had been raised from the dead and he ascended into heaven, and the first thing the disciples did was to call a special business meeting to

select someone to fill Judas' slot on the board of deacons. Look it up. Acts 1. For some reason they thought they had to have twelve. (Extra points if you know who they selected. In future printed material he would be listed as the new twelfth disciple, but there would be an asterisk by his name.)

Some of you knew Wally Christian, the late professor of religion at Baylor. One day in class he told about two men who had been born blind but had been given their sight by Jesus. They met one day and relived their experiences.

"It was the most wonderful day in my life," said one.

"Yes," the other, "I remember like it was yesterday how he put some dirt in his hand and spat on it and made some mud and put it on my eyes and I could see."

"What? He did what?"

"Don't you remember? He spat . . ."

"That's disgusting! He did no such thing. He just said the word and I could see. Blasphemer!"

Thusly did the first Christian denominations come into being – the Muddites and the Anti-Muddites.

Christians have been drawing lines, making boxes to put people in, and writing rules for a kingdom that isn't theirs ever since.

Where there are boxes there are people who don't quite fit.

People like Simone Weil, the French Jewish philosopher, activist, and mystic who defended her decision not to officially become a Christian by saying, "I think it is well that a few sheep remain outside the fold in order to bear witness that the love of Christ is essentially different." What box is there for someone like that?

Or Leonard Cohen, the singer, songwriter and poet whom I quoted in the first sermon I preached in September: "*Any guy who says, 'Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek' has got to be a figure of unparalleled generosity and insight and madness ... A man who declared himself to stand among the thieves, the prostitutes and the homeless. His position . . . is a generosity that would overthrow the world if it was embraced because nothing could weather that compassion.*" Leonard Cohen was a practicing Orthodox Jew till the day he died – with a little Buddhism thrown in. And a deep respect for Jesus.

A couple of Sundays ago, I quoted Warren Carr, my predecessor and resident curmudgeon at Wake Forest Baptist Church, who said that Christians typically like to divide the world into believers and unbelievers. But he said there is another category, one into which many intellectually honest people fall – the can't believer. This is someone who has struggled more with faith than most doctrinally pure believers.

This is the one Willie Nelson sang about: "*There's believers and deceivers and old in-betweeners who seem to have no place to go.*" The one whose confession of faith is that of the biblical character who said, "*Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.*" The one Alfred Lord Tennyson may have had in mind when he said, "*There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.*"

Jesus has "other sheep." Who are they? I don't know. My bet is that they don't march behind a denominational flag or maybe even the Christian flag. They probably don't wear a label. And they sure don't talk the talk, the religious jargon of Zion. But

they walk the walk. And they may walk closer behind than many of Jesus' more identifiable sheep.

They may be the ones who on the day of God's final judgment of humanity, say, in great surprise, "When did we visit you in prison or feed you when you were hungry or welcome you when you were a stranger? When did we cloth you when you were naked?" They may be the ones who hear the words of the Great Shepherd, "Enter the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world." Maybe.

But you know what? It's not our business to go around separating sheep from goats. Jesus has got that covered. "*I know my sheep,*" he said, "*and they know me.*" That's all that counts.

May God grant that we might be faithful in the task before us, that might do what we have been called to do with equal parts diligence and humility, with an eye out always for those who just might be Jesus' "other sheep." Amen.