

Jesus's Other Sheep

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Good Shepherd Sunday

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“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” – John

10:16a

So I was over at the gym the other day, mixing it up with the sleek and the svelte, and I was listening to an interview with the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, the Missouri-born daughter of a Palestinian refugee father and an American mother of German and Swiss ancestry. Nye was explaining to the interviewer that one of the reasons she became a writer was perhaps to escape from the mind-numbing first-grade textbook she was forced to learn to read from, the series of books populated by the two-dimensional characters mother, father, Dick, Jane, and the dog, Spot.

“Run, Spot, run!” and “See Spot run!” and “Come, Jane, come!” and “Look, Dick, look!” and Nye wondered, even as a child, if there were ever duller people in the world, that you had to tell them to look around them; why weren’t they looking at things to begin with?

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, the church asks us to look again at the world around us. The fracturing of reality that is Jesus’s resurrection gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves if what we think we know is actually what there is to know.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of John directs our attention to one of the most comforting—and, if we’re honest and looking attentively, one of the most unsettling—images in all of scripture: Jesus as the shepherd, and we as the sheep.

It is comforting because it speaks of care, guidance, and protection. But it is also unsettling because it can lead us down a path of parochialism of the worst sort. We can hear Jesus’s words

in such a way that we think we know who's in the flock and who's not.

But if we read carefully, using the whole witness of Scripture as our hermeneutical framework – and “hermeneutical framework” is a fancy term simply meaning the way we approach a text – then Good Shepherd Sunday can remind us that the flock is not ours to define. The Shepherd does that. From the sixteenth verse of the tenth chapter of John, hear again: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”

Some of you may recall that on Easter I tried to make the point that the gospel is all about you. Today, on Good Shepherd Sunday, I need to make the point that the gospel is not all about you.

Although that sounds a little slippery, it's really about something we Christians talk a lot about but practice very little: humility.

Some Christian sage once said that there are three things necessary to be a Christian. The first is humility, the second is

humility, and the third is humility. And Good Shepherd Sunday presses that lesson upon us, because Jesus tells us that he has sheep about whom we know nothing. And respecting our ignorance is an expression of humility.

We've got two thousand years of Christian history to tell us that one of the greatest temptations we Christians have ever faced is what theologians would call *Christian soteriological exclusivism*. That's a mouthful for a simple idea: our way or the highway.

"Soteriological" means related to salvation; exclusivism is self-explanatory. Put them together, and you get the claim that salvation is through us and us alone. We **say** salvation is through Jesus, but we **act** as though it's through us.

We imagine that we **received** the truth, we've **preserved** the truth, and no one else **has** the truth except us. Heaven is waiting—and it's waiting just for us.

And we know where that comes from. The idea is found in several places in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, for instance, after healing a man, Peter boldly declares of Jesus, “There is salvation in no one else.” That’s a testimony of faith on the part of Peter—but in our hands, it has too often become something else: a boundary marker at best, a weapon at worst.

Because we also know where this way of thinking leads. It leads to hatred disguised as love. It reinforces our sense of being chosen, favored, special. It nurtures a tribalism and triumphalism that, when it gains power, slides into exclusion, then oppression, and sometimes worse.

You don’t have to look far to see it. In our own time, we see conflicts—whether in the ongoing devastation in places like Gaza Strip or in the grinding war in Ukraine—where each side is tempted to claim not only justice, but ultimate righteousness.

History keeps reminding us how quickly the conviction that “God

is on our side” can turn into the assumption that others must therefore be outside of God’s care.

Which is why Jesus’s words on this Good Shepherd Sunday matter so much: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”

There is the corrective—from Jesus himself. He tells his followers—tells us—that he has sheep who are not part of our fold. They are not part of our group. They don’t inhabit our theological world or share our worldview. As far as we know, they don’t think like us, believe like us, or see the world like us. They may have nothing to do with us—but they have everything to do with him. Or, more to the point, he has everything to do with them. And that’s what matters.

The Gospel of John, that most difficult of gospels, from which today’s reading comes, begins, famously, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

And that eternal, uncreated divine reality—the Word of

God—manifested itself to us in the form of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. So in John's gospel, whenever Jesus speaks, it is divine reality communicating itself to us in such a way that we can perceive, grasp, and sometimes even act on it.

But it's not easy, as John's gospel makes very clear with all of those stories of people not understanding what they're interacting with when they're interacting with Jesus. They don't realize that they are encountering the divine. Instead, they keep treating Jesus as though he were just another really smart, really nice, really charismatic Jewish boy from Nazareth.

And we Christians have failed in almost the same way. We have so entangled the Word of God and the first-century Galilean rabbi and the super-Jew-turned-super-Christian Paul that we've turned Jesus into the first Christian and then quietly replaced him with Christianity itself. Instead of proclaiming the Word of God as the way and the truth and the life—which is what the Gospel of John

proclaims—we end up with the message that **Christianity** is the way and the truth and the life.

The logic is subtle—and deadly. If Jesus is the way, and we follow Jesus, then everyone else must walk the same path that we're walking. And just like that, Christianity, rather than the Word of God, becomes the way, the truth, and the life. Just as slick as a whistle, our religion slips into the place that belongs to God alone. And that, friends, is what we call idolatry.

To be fair, we've made some progress. We're no longer, for the most part, condemning one another across denominational lines. But there are still millions of sincere Christians who implicitly—or explicitly—cling to the idea that everyone else is outside the reach of salvation. "Outside the church there is no salvation," as Cyprian of Carthage put it way back in the third century, and too often, that posture still masquerades as love.

But I want to suggest another kind of Christian love. A love that focuses not on us, but on God, our Good Shepherd and guide.

It's the kind of love described by erstwhile megapastor Rob Bell in his 2011 book *Love Wins*. You may remember the story: a piece of art in Bell's church combined Jesus's words about peacemaking with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. Someone attached a note that read, "Reality check: Gandhi's in hell."

That moment forced Bell to ask whether he really believed that. His answer was no. Because in the end, what saves us is not the precision of our beliefs, but the depth and breadth of God's love. A love that is wider than our categories, deeper than our doctrines, and more persistent than our exclusions.

And it cost him. For saying so publicly, Bell lost his place in the megachurch he had built. Which tells you something about how threatening this idea still is.

So on this Good Shepherd Sunday, that's the good news: the gospel is not all about us. It is not about what we believe, what we declare, or how tightly we draw the circle. It is about the Shepherd.

The Shepherd who has sheep we do not know.

The Shepherd whose voice reaches beyond our boundaries.

The Shepherd whose love refuses to be contained by our theology.

It is not the bleating of the sheep—the noise of our doctrines, our pronouncements, our carefully constructed systems—to which a genuine believer ultimately responds. It is the voice of the Shepherd: the voice of the living Word of God, more gracious, more generous, and more expansive than anything we have managed to articulate.

Given Christianity's uneven track record in embodying that love, it is very good news that the gospel is not finally about us.

It is about the Shepherd.

And that Shepherd is still speaking and still asking us to follow—not our doctrines, not what a minister or pastor tells us, not what we've always done in this church or that one—but rather

follow in the path of the love of the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down her life for the sheep—once, for all—so that God can raise that life up again beyond all earthly boundaries, limitations, and fears.

That's the voice speaking to us from the loving heart of the universe. Can you hear it?