

“Other Sheep”

April 26, 2015

Dr. Frank Allen

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

BLIND FROM BIRTH

Jesus said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”
Who was Jesus talking about? Who are these other sheep?
I think the passage that precedes our lesson gives us a clue.

In that story Jesus and his disciples pass by a man who has been blind from birth.

Now when Jesus’ disciples saw the blind man, they asked,
“Who sinned? This man or his parents?”

In that question the disciples expressed a common belief.
They believed that tragedy was always due to something that someone else had done wrong.

You've heard this before.
Something bad happens to a person and they ask,
"What did I do to deserve this?"

We always want to blame someone for tragedy. We blame the doctor or the teacher or the policeman or even the minister. And sometimes we even blame ourselves.

We just can't get it out of our heads that when tragedy comes it is because someone else has sinned.

Since the man was blind from birth, the disciples speculated that perhaps the man's parents were terrible sinners and the punishment of blindness was due to his parent's sin. Or perhaps God foresaw that the man would be a terrible sinner and visited the curse of blindness upon him in advance.

Jesus said that his blindness was not due to anyone's sin. Instead, it was an opportunity to bring God's light to someone who had lived all his life in darkness. To use the imagery of today's lesson, it was an opportunity to bring someone who had been isolated from the flock back into the fold.

ONLY THE BLIND SEE

Jesus chose an unusual way to heal this man.
He made a mud poultice out of spit and dirt and put it on the man's eyes.
He then told the man to go to Pool of Siloam and wash the poultice off.

The blind man did as he was told, and he went home with his sight fully restored.

As you can imagine this caused quite a stir.
Everyone wanted to know how this happened, including the religious authorities.
The blind man said, "Jesus did it."

Now that was a problem. The religious leaders thought Jesus was a sinner because he didn't keep the Sabbath, and they thought that the blind man was a sinner as well.

He was born in sin.
Why else was he blind for so long?

They tried to get the blind man to change his story. But, he wouldn't do it. So, after much hand wringing and cajoling, the religious leaders cast him out.

But, Jesus found this lost sheep who had been cast out and took him in.

All this made the religious leaders really mad.

They didn't like the idea of accepting people who were not a part of their flock.

And Jesus said in effect,

“You're the ones who are really blind.”

OTHER SHEEP

I wonder. Are we sometimes like that?
Are we more interested in keeping out the riffraff instead of helping the blind to see?

Jesus reminded the religious leaders, and he reminds his own disciples in our lesson for today,

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.
I *must* bring them also. And they will listen to my voice.”

Notice Jesus says, “I *must* bring them also.”
This suggests that bringing in the other sheep is job one in the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is not about exclusion.
The kingdom of God is about inclusion.
The kingdom of God is not about keeping the blind sheep out.
The kingdom of God is about enabling the blind sheep to see.

A man blind from birth seems beyond help. But, Jesus could help him.

The blind man heard and obeyed the voice of Jesus, and later he had the opportunity to see Jesus' face and trust in him completely. If Jesus could make the blind see, maybe he could give "sight" to other sheep that now live in darkness.

Who might those "other sheep" be today?

We all know someone that would fit into that category.
All around us there are those that live in darkness.
All around us there are those that we think are beyond help.

And sometimes we give up on those other sheep.
We are tempted to think that they are lost forever.

JESUS IS NOT DONE WITH US

But, in this passage Jesus is saying,

"I'm not done with them yet. When I'm around the blind receive their sight, and those who live in darkness are given new life. The miracle of faith can still happen in the most unlikely of places.

Jesus still says, "I have other sheep, and they will listen to my voice."

In other words Jesus offers hope for those who are now outside the flock. The love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is expansive.

In John 3:16 we read that God loves the world, the whole creation. And because of that, God in Christ is always reaching out and bringing in the "other sheep" that are lost.

God's flock is a whole lot bigger than any of his disciples could have imagined.

God's flock is a lot bigger than we can imagine. This means that we look at everyone not necessarily as they are but as what they might become.

I love teachers.

I love teachers so much I even married one!

But, the thing I like about teachers is that they look at students not as who they are right now but as who they might become. Teachers see potential because they know and believe in the power of education.

This belief in the power of education strengthens and upholds teachers despite political wrangling, long hours and unsympathetic parents.

Teachers have seen students transformed by that one teachable moment. And that lifts them up and points them toward the future.

The same should be true for the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus has told us that he has “other sheep that will hear his voice.” And we believe because we have seen the power of the gospel to transform lives.

There’s a bumper sticker that reads,

“Be patient with me. God’s not finished with me yet.”
I guess its somewhat comforting to know that we’re a work in progress.

Well, the Bible tells us that this is true of the whole creation.

The God who created the heavens and the earth is in the process of recreating us, all of us.

And this means there’s hope, not only for those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ but also for those who now live in darkness and seem to be lost forever.

When they hear the voice of Jesus these lost sheep can be saved. This means that Christians should have hope for all people.

We don’t have hope because we think people are basically good and will do the right thing when given the opportunity. We have hope because we believe that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep of his fold. We have hope because we believe that the Spirit of God in Christ can bring light into the darkest life.

Even those blind from birth can one day see the light of day.

PRISON SEMINARY

I read about how this is happening at Columbia Seminary, my old school. Guess where they are teaching seminary classes now? They are teaching classes in prison!

Fifteen to twenty women in prison are given the opportunity to study theology for a year at the Arrendale Prison for Women in Georgia. At the end of their studies they are given a Certificate in Theological Studies.

The program has two goals.

The first goal is to prepare incarcerated women to serve as leaders and to develop their critical academic skills through a yearlong program of quality theological education.

The second goal is to provide seminary and doctoral students with fulfilling teaching opportunities and formative experiences for ministry and discernment.

Apparently, my seminary truly believes that there are “other sheep” in prison who need to hear the voice of Jesus.

One of the participants in this program, a woman by the name of Kelly Renee Gissendaner received particular notoriety because she was scheduled to be put to death by lethal injection. (She hired someone to kill her husband.)

But, despite her sentence she completed the theology program. And now this inmate on death row has become a passionate student of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rowan Williams and the distinguished theologian, Jurgen Moltmann. In fact Moltmann has even started a correspondence with Kelly.

Now none of this takes away from the fact that Kelly did plot to have her husband killed. But, she has shown remorse for her actions, and the man who actually carried out the killing has received a sentence of life in prison.

I wonder.

Could even people on death row be the “other sheep” that Jesus is calling?

I know.

People in desperate situations often “get religion” in hopes of influencing the justice system.

But, *sometimes* people who have lived in darkness for a long time hear the voice of Jesus and are able to see the light for the first time. Sometimes what is impossible for men and women becomes a possibility when God gets involved.

THE KINGDOM THAT COMES

We believe that Jesus is the answer to that ancient Jewish hope for a Messiah. This Messiah would bring in the kingdom of God. He would make God’s people a light to the nations.

But, what the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day didn’t expect was that this salvation could be so far-reaching. Jesus brought in a kingdom in which:

the blind could see, enemies could become friends,
prisoners could be set free, the hungry could be fed,
and even the foreigner would be welcomed like a long lost brother or sister

These other sheep were not in the fold now, but Jesus foresaw a day when they would hear his voice and follow.

And I think Jesus wants us to have the same kind of vision. He wants us to look at people not as they are but as what God means for them to be.

HIRED HANDS VERSUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Today’s Scripture lesson also contains a warning. Jesus said that he was the Good Shepherd. He was willing to lay his life for the sheep.

But, there were others who are not the good shepherd. They are “hired hands” who were not willing to sacrifice for the sheep. When the wolf comes they run away, and the wolf destroys the flock.

In this case I think Jesus is referring to the religious leaders of his day who cared too much about rules and regulations and too little about the other sheep who needed to be gathered into the fold.

They were not the shepherd, but they pretended to be the shepherd.
They pretended to have the answers when in reality their hearts were far from the kingdom of God.

Pretend shepherds can be very cruel.
The religious leaders of Jesus' day laid heavy burdens on the backs of the people.
They turned the grace of God into man made rules and regulations.
They neglected the love and justice of God in favor of power and privilege.

And, as we have noted many times, that story has been repeated in the history of the church. Great cathedrals have been built on the backs of the working poor.

Wars have been fought for "religious" reasons.
Even today many religious leaders seem more interested in power and money than in service and sacrifice.

WE ARE THE OTHER SHEEP

Why do we keep making the same mistake?
We keep making the same mistake because we do not know our true identity.

We are not the good shepherd.
Only Jesus is the Good Shepherd.
Only God in Christ can call us and lead us beside the green pastures and still waters.

We are sheep.
And not only that, we are the "other sheep."

We are the ones that would still be in darkness if we had not heard the voice of Jesus.

Jesus healed us as a sign of the kingdom that comes.
We were strangers in a foreign land, and he took us in.
We were blind, and he enabled us to see.

RECALLED TO SERVICE

At the end of John's gospel the risen Christ appears while the disciples are fishing.

Jesus once again calls them to leave their nets in order to be his disciples.

And there is one disciple who is particularly interested in what Jesus has to say, Peter.

Peter doesn't even wait for the fishing boat to make it to shore.

He jumps into the water and swims to Jesus.

There's a reason Peter is so anxious to see Jesus.

He needs to be forgiven.

We know the story.

When the wolf was at the gate, Peter denied his Lord three times.

But, now Peter is given three chances to affirm his love of Jesus.

Peter does affirm his love.

It's a bittersweet moment.

He says, "Lord, you know that I love you."

And Peter is also given a chance to show his love of Jesus by doing something.

Jesus gives Peter three charges.

"Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Follow me." (See John 21:15-19)

What finally qualifies Peter to feed and tend the sheep is not his success but his failure.

Peter knows what it is like to be one of the "other sheep" who have been separated from the flock and who needs desperately to hear the voice of the Master again.

And that's what will make him a good at proclaiming the gospel.

Peter now knows the truth about Jesus and himself.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the only Good Shepherd.

We do not lead him.

We follow him.

And those who have been broken by life and lifted up by God's grace are most qualified to feed and tend the sheep.

We don't do it for money.
We don't do it for glory.
We don't do it for power.

We do it out of gratitude.
We tend God's sheep because we know personally the grace of God.

We tend the sheep out of love for the One who brought the light of forgiveness into our darkness.
This is the power of the gospel.

I wonder if Jesus wants us to see those other sheep that everyone else seems to miss?
I if Jesus is calling us to speak a word of hope to them, to feed and tend his sheep?
I think he is.

God isn't finished with us yet.
God still calls us to follow in the way of Jesus.

And God in Christ tells us that there's still hope.
There's hope even for those "other sheep."
Sheep like you and me. Amen.