

Sunday, April 25, 2021
Sermon: Listening to the Good Shepherd
Pastor Adam Ericksen
Clackamas United Church of Christ

John 10:11-18

Friends, our prayer time, as often does, leads us beautifully into our sermon today. Shania, you have put together a prayer request that is everything that this sermon, I'm hoping, is going to speak. You said, "I've been feeling a little lonely and have been struggling to hear God." As I said during our prayer time, you're not alone, that's where a lot of us are at. That's where I am at and it's hard, especially as this pandemic continues, and we're supposed to be together and then we're not supposed to be together. Everybody's getting vaccinated but covid numbers are still going up and it's just a really confusing and anxious time, made worse by the hope of being able to get together sooner than what we're able to do. So Shania, I'm with you and it's a lonely time.

I have been trying to have conversations with my dad during the last four years. I've talked before about my dad and I having some different points of view, especially during the last four years. I know many of you have had these same struggles with family members, as well, so I've tried to shift my strategy with my dad. Last time we met, I said to him that I don't want to talk about politics, I don't want to talk about religion. I would much rather talk about you and your life.

When I was a chaplain at a hospital, we did this thing with people who were coming near the end of their lives called a life review. My dad has many years left but he's in his 80s and I realized that I hadn't talked with my dad about a lot of his life before I entered the world. So I was curious about my dad and growing up and what school was like in college, and my dad went to graduate school. So I started asking him all of these questions to get to know him better, to do kind of this life review. He talked about being in graduate school. He grew up in the northwest but he went to graduate school in Texas at Rice University and he told me that during the first couple of weeks, maybe even a couple of semesters, that the one thing that he really really wanted was to hear someone's voice say his name. Just to hear someone name him because he felt so alone in this different culture, in this different place. He just felt so alone. It's the power of the name. The power of hearing someone's voice compassionately say your name, especially when you're feeling so lonely and out of place.

Hearing someone say your name can be so healing when we feel so alone and this is what my dad needed. It's what I think we all need during these times of feeling alone and feeling a sense of lacking of physical community with one another. I think it's also what Jesus is trying to get at today with this image of the good shepherd. Jesus says that he and God are like a good shepherd. A



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JESUS, JOHN 10:16

shepherd that Jesus says I know my own and my own know me. A shepherd speaks to their sheep. Their sheep know their shepherd's voice and they follow it. A sheep can distinguish between their shepherd's voice and someone else's voice. And Jesus says that he is like our good shepherd so one of the big questions that we need to deal with, I think, is the question of whose voice are we listening to because there are so many competing voices. There are voices that call us by name but they don't have our best interest at heart, they're not the good shepherd. They might be as Jesus calls them, "the hired hand" who doesn't really care about us but might be trying to use us to their own advantage. Or there might be the voice of the wolf within our culture, the wolf who tries to divide the world up into good guys and bad guys, who belongs and who doesn't belong. This is how many of us have experienced organized religion. Not as the good shepherd who calls out to the sheep with the voice of love and compassion. But religion is often the voice of the wolf who doesn't call out with compassion and love but with hostility and division of us against them. The good shepherd doesn't do that.

Notice how Jesus talks about the good shepherd. He says that I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold, and I must bring them in. This is the heart of Jesus' message - there are sheep that are not of this fold, I have to go get them, too. You see, there's something inside of me that goes back to this organized religion - the wolf isn't just something out there. The wolf is also inside of me because when Jesus says, "I have sheep that are not of this fold," there's something in me that wants to protest. There's something in me that wants to say "No, Jesus. Jesus, the sheep are right here, they're our community, they're people who look like me and think like me. Those are your sheep. And every time I fall into that trap, Jesus expands the circle and says, "No Adam, there are sheep that are not of this fold." There are sheep who belong who don't look like you, who don't worship like you. There are sheep that call the good shepherd by different names. There are sheep that aren't white, that have brown skin and black skin. There are sheep who are Asian. They all belong.

That's what Jesus is getting at here every time we try to divide the world up into us and them. Jesus says we're not playing that game anymore because you belong and they belong, too. Jesus says that the road is narrow that leads to salvation but the road that leads to destruction is wide. Why is that road wide? Because that's the road that we have traveled so many times. That road is wide because so many people have traveled that road. The road that leads to destruction is the road of hostility that creates an identity of me as sheep against those people there who are the wolves. Jesus brings in the sheep and I see other sheep and I think wow, I thought that was a wolf."

The road is narrow that leads to salvation because it invites us, whenever we decide to divide the world into us and them, to say no it's just us who are sheep and everybody else is a wolf. That road is wide. The narrow road is moving beyond that and seeing that Jesus has sheep that will surprise us. In the realm of God, there are people who live there that we may not expect. And in each of us there is the sheep, there is the wolf. Which one are we going to live into? Jesus invites us to live together. What does it mean to be church in this moment? It means to follow our shepherd. Where

there are sheep who are coming in from all kinds of different places that we may never have expected. And Jesus says this is his job to bring the sheep in.

I had a great experience with this yesterday when our Minister of Justice and Witness, Amira, put on an End White Supremacy event. And at that event in Salem, there were so many great speakers. Some of those speakers were from a group here in the Portland area called Black Joy. What a great name, Black Joy. Black Joy is a group of our black siblings who go around in Oregon to our black siblings who may be living in isolation, who may be feeling alone, and Black Joy, this organization, gets together and goes and visits them for a weekend to help them know that they're not alone, to bring some joy into that space. And as they were telling us some of those stories of how they have done this and the smiles on their faces, they also talked about the George Floyd verdict this last week. I had been experiencing that thinking yes, here's an example of some kind of justice in this world, something good that is happening. And as the members of Black Joy were talking about these really joyful things that they have done, they took a minute and reflected on the George Floyd verdict and they became a little more somber. They said yes, as good as this is, as important as this is, it also has a sense of weighing us down. They said they know that the journey hasn't ended here. That we have to continue the work of justice to make sure that our black siblings live in a more just world where they're not shot, where a black woman makes more than 60 cents to every dollar that a white man makes.

They were very clear about the joy that they are living in but also not naive about the things that we need to continue to do to make a more just world. Jesus wasn't naive either. He knew that there were systems in place that acted like a wolf. Systems during his day that benefited the rich and the powerful at the expense of the sheep and in the same way we have those same similar systems today. Call it white supremacy, call it power, call it the systems and principalities, call it whatever you will, it's still there. And Black Joy was there as a voice calling out to the sheep that there is joy in the world and that there is still work to do.

I think that's the message that Jesus gives to us calling each of us in a gentle voice. Where Jesus says there will be one flock and one shepherd. This isn't a unity that gets rid of our diversity but a unity that says we are here together in the spirit of love and compassion, moving together in that world in that way to create a better and more just and loving world. And so friends, may we continue on that journey together, lifting one another up in prayer and in love so that we know that we're not alone. Shania, we're here with you, we're here together. May it be so now and forevermore. Amen