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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
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 Text: John 10:11-18

Other Sheep

“I am the Good Shepherd.” That’s what Jesus says here in the Gospel of John. Well, you need to know right off the bat that I am a city slicker. I have spent nearly all my life in suburban and metropolitan areas, and not on a farm, so I don’t know much about shepherding or sheep except what I have read. Jesus, of course, lived in a first century agrarian setting and plucked images out of his world to make his points. I wonder what he would have said if he lived in 21st century Athens: “I am the loyal cub scout master”; or maybe, “I am the reliable IT support guy”; or perhaps, “I am the true dog owner”?

Well, that’s a theological pondering we may never know the answer to.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus said. Aside from shepherds being a familiar figure in his day and time, Jesus is here drawing on pastoral imagery from the Old Testament. Remember, all the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and their families were herdsman. Plus Moses was a shepherd, keeping his father in law’s flock when he encountered God in the burning bush and got tapped for the Exodus project. David, of course, was a shepherd boy with a sling shot before becoming king. In the psalms and prophets, the rulers of Israel were sometimes pictured metaphorically as shepherdsⁱ. The shepherd image was also used to speak of God as we heard in the passage from Ezekiel and remember from the 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my shepherd. So Jesus is drawing from a rich well when he calls himself the Good Shepherd.

A good shepherd, in contrast to a hired hand, cares about the sheep. While hired hands are just in it for their paycheck and turn tail at the first sign of danger, the shepherd who owns the sheep has a lot more invested. Sheep need a lot of caring, I’ve learned. They are not too smart, are easily scared, can wander off, are vulnerable to predators, need guidance, and like to eat a lot. That pretty much describes the church. Sometimes pastors are thought of as shepherds, as the name “pastor” implies. But really, we are more like sheep dogs that nudge the sheep along and are supposed to do the shepherd’s bidding—though some of us need to repeat obedience school...often. *Jesus* is the shepherd.

The early church loved this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It crops up in the New Testament epistlesⁱⁱ and was the most common symbol of Christ in early Christian art.ⁱⁱⁱ You can see a famous example in a Vatican museum. It’s a fourth century statue of a shepherd with a lamb across his shoulders.

More than just owning the sheep, the good (or ideal) shepherd knows his sheep intimately. A few verses before our text, Jesus says that the shepherd calls the sheep by name.^{iv} I read that Palestinian shepherds frequently have pet names for their favorite sheep like “Long-ears,” or “white Nose.”^v Sheep do recognize the voice of their shepherd. I actually know this from experience. My family has some mountain property in rural southwest Virginia. Our closest permanent neighbors were the Handys. When I was a little girl I used to like to go over to the Handys and see Mrs. Handy feed her chickens and churn her butter. I was amazed to watch Mr. Handy call his sheep in. He could stand at the fence and call “Here, sheepee, sheepee” and sheep

way across the pasture up on the hillside would stop eating, listen to his voice, and turn and come toward him. I could holler the same thing until I was blue in the face, doing my best to imitate Mr. Handy, and the sheep would keep grazing, paying me no mind whatsoever.

The bond between shepherd and sheep that Jesus speaks of is so strong that the Good Shepherd is willing to risk his life for the sheep. Did you hear it? Five times in the passage we heard, Jesus speaks of the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. He protects and rescues them at great cost.

We are not alone in this world, left up to our own devices. We belong to a loving God. The Good Shepherd knows each of us intimately and will never abandon us. We are part of his fold. That's what Jesus told his followers then and still tells us now through this text. We've heard it a million times. It sounds trite. You might even be inoculated against hearing it but it is true: Jesus loves you. You belong to him. He is the Good Shepherd and you are his sheep—individually and collectively. Take that to heart, especially when the wolves lurk in shadows (which they do) and the valleys are dark and scary. We belong to the Good Shepherd. We are loved, cared for, provided for, intimately known, and saved at great cost.

However, as Jesus is delivering these reassurances he makes a curious remark. Maybe it's to keep his followers from becoming too smug. Maybe it's to remind us that we don't have a monopoly on the Good Shepherd. He declares, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Other sheep? Who? Where? What is he talking about?

The gospels were likely written in the latter part of the first century. This was during the time of the Gentile mission when the Spirit was blowing the fences down and enlarging the sheep pen exponentially. The church was expanding beyond its first adherents who were Jewish. It was drawing people from outside Israel and outside the Jewish tradition. We see this reflected in stories in this gospel, in stories like the Samaritan woman at the well and the Greeks who are inquiring after Jesus, and in sayings like, "For God so loved—not Israel but--*the world* that he sent his only son." So, the "other sheep" to John's audience were probably Gentiles (nonJews).

But who are the other sheep in our context? What might Jesus be saying to us through this text in our day? Who are the people who aren't in our fold, who are different from us but whom Jesus also claims? This is a live question for us since we live in such a pluralistic age.

I went in March with the Prime Time Presbyterians to the Hindu Temple in Lillburn. It's one of fifteen Hindu temples in the metro Atlanta area. I had no idea there were some 100,000 Hindus in Atlanta. It was a remarkably beautiful sanctuary. Our tour guide was a warm and hospitable gentleman, a top professional in the telecommunications world who volunteers his time to take folks like us around his house of worship. He was deeply respectful of our Christian tradition and treated us as though we were his sisters and brothers in faith. He told us of the many charitable missions to aid the needy which his temple supports and that, contrary to popular belief, Hinduism is a monotheistic religion. Hindus, he said, believe in one god who has had many incarnations. Could it be that devout followers of other religions who feed the hungry and worship the God of their understanding are some of Jesus' other sheep?

I know there are verses in the Bible you can point to which would seem to negate this possibility. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that you can point to both exclusive and inclusive tendencies in scripture. This passage seems to point in the direction of inclusion: "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."

One day the pope got a phone call from God. After exchanging pleasantries God said,

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?”

“The good news, of course,” replied the pope.

“The good news is that I have decided there is to be one true religion.”

“That’s great!” said the pope. “We’ve been saying that for years. What’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is that I’m calling from Salt Lake City.”

But truly, we cannot say with any certainty who the other sheep are. We do not know. None of us does. We do well to be humble and not be in the business of declaring who is beyond the pale.

We may not know who the other sheep are but let me remind you of what we do know:

We know some things about God. We know that God is love. We know that God created everyone in God’s own image and loves them all. We know that God is sovereign and to quote Isaiah, “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways.”^{vi} We know that God is the judge and not us, though it is very tempting for us to climb up on the bench and pound the gavel.

We also know some things that God asks of us. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Be kind and compassionate. Serve one another. According to Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, “The Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger.’^{vii} Of course Jesus in answer to the query, “Who is my neighbor?” told the story of the Good Samaritan, thus making it clear that neighbor means not just the person that looks, and talks, and believes like you but the one who is different—the stranger. In a world where there is far too much hatred and violence, understanding and respect for everyone are crucial.

Following September 11th, Ranya Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent faced constant questions about Islam, God, and death from her children, the only Muslims in their classroom. Ranya reached out to two other mothers—a Christian and a Jew—to try to understand and answer these questions for her children. The three women agreed to meet together and decided to write a picture book for their children that would highlight the connections between their three religions. Soon it became clear that they themselves had concerns, stereotypes, and misconceptions about each other’s faith traditions, and if they were to complete their project, they must be open, honest, and willing to listen and learn. The experience was a profoundly spiritual one for them each.^{viii} We do well to engage with people from other faiths and learn about their beliefs.

At my alma mater, the University of North Carolina, post 9-11 the freshman class was required to read the Qur’an in an effort to foster understanding. Some Bible Belt parents raised a stink, worried that the school was endeavoring to convert their children to Islam. The chancellor was quoted as saying, “There were no known conversions; Carolina’s religion remains basketball.”^{ix}

In addition to knowing some things about God and knowing the ways God asks us to treat others, we also know that we know those things because we know Jesus Christ. It is in the person of Jesus Christ that God is revealed to us—maybe not to everyone but certainly to us. Through the incarnated Jesus we have come to know this loving, caring, shepherding God. We can witness unabashedly to the truth as we know it and have experienced it in Jesus Christ without claiming we have a corner on God. As we share the Good News, I think the God we know in Jesus Christ comes alive best when we appreciate and show hospitality toward those not in our fold.

There’s a ministry called Christmas International House. Its purpose is to offer Christian

hospitality during the holidays to foreign students studying in US universities. The sad fact is that so many of these students are the best and brightest of their countries; they come here to learn, they return home to become leaders in government and industry, yet seldom if ever do they set foot in an American home or visit a Christian church. My church in Atlanta participated in this nation-wide program. Members agreed to provide a student with bed and breakfast for a week and welcome them into their family's normal activities. A widow in the congregation always volunteered to host four students and professed often that it was the highlight of her year to get to know these remarkable young adults from all over the world. After one Christmas Eve service to which she brought her two Japanese and two Chinese students, she was beaming. She told me, "I cannot think of a better way to celebrate Christmas than to stand beside four Buddhists in my church, all of us singing heartily, 'Joy to the World'!"

May the Good Shepherd by whose mercy we live every day, give us confidence in his love and openness toward other sheep. Amen.

ⁱ E.g. Psalm 78:71, Isaiah 56:11, Jer. 10:21

ⁱⁱ E.g. Heb. 13:10; I Peter 2:25, 5:4; Rev. 7:17

ⁱⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Shepherd on 4/22/15

iv. John 10:3

v. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, (Garden City, NY Double Day, 1966), p. 385.

^{vi} Isaiah 55:8. Interestingly that text comes from a section which talks about righteous foreigners sharing in God's salvation.

^{vii} Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), p. 97.

^{viii} The book by Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner about their experience is *The Faith Club* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

^{ix} Quoted in *Christian Century*, Sept. 25- Oct. 8, 2002.