

Diversity

“I have other sheep”

Reflection 35 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

I note that many who struggle with church these days, including many in the generation now coming into its prime, the generation we call the Millennials, do not struggle with diversity. A Pew Poll of the U.S. Religious Landscape in 2008 suggests that Americans today are less dogmatic and more diverse in their approach to faith than ever before. They are more diverse in their ethnicity, and they are more diverse in the way they think. How could they not be? How could they not be in a culture in which every idea is now contestable and contested?

While this can be disorienting, it is helpful to realize that Scripture shows us a way to live and a way to think in such a culture. It is helpful to realize that everywhere in Scripture itself there are multiple perspectives. Jesus, in fact, by his life and teaching, is always called us to a higher logic, to a higher perspective, that transcends simplistic, either-or thinking, a logic that is more flexible, that allows for multiple interpretations and possibilities and that is consequently true to the way life really is. Jesus tells us when we evaluate others to quit seeing them in simplistic ways, in black and white. He challenges us to extend to others the grace we know we need ourselves. With regard to judging, he says, “Quit it.” And over and over again – yes, in Scripture – those who are absolutely convinced of their own rightness and of the dunderheaded wrongness of everyone else get surprised.

Consider Jesus’ teaching in John 10:14-16. It’s part of the “Good Shepherd” passage that begins in John 10:1. Jesus is saying, “I AM the good shepherd” in verse 11. I am not like the thieves or robbers or hired hands who do it only for money and run away at the first sign of trouble. I note that our whole picture of shepherding is blurred by our rough forcible Western ways of herding, complete with sheep dogs biting and nipping at hooves. When I was growing up, I spent some summers working on farms. I remember the way I used to herd cattle with a Volkswagen Bug spinning around the field driving the strays back to the herd. It’s where I learned to drive. I was not a good shepherd.

Jesus, however, comes saying, “I am the good Shepherd.” I will lead you beside quiet waters; I will restore your soul (Psalm 23). I will strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, search for the lost (Ezekiel 34). I will gather you in my arms, and carry you close to my heart (Isaiah 40:11). I will risk my life; I will go out into the wild places to find and save you, even when maybe you’re not quite aware enough to know that you’re lost (Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:4). I will go on ahead of you, checking things out, steering you away from danger. Yes, sometimes I may have to zing you – a well-placed stone with my slingshot in your way to get you back to pasture. But when night comes in your life, I will, I myself will, sleep across the opening to the sheepfold. I will be for you a living door. And in the end I will lay down my life for you.

The text also says: We can know the shepherd’s voice. Something intimate happens between the good shepherd and his sheep. He has spent years with them. He knows them by name – “Brown-leg,” “Black-ear,” “Hop-a-Long,” “Stripe” and “Snout.” He even has an individual call for each

of them. And they know his voice. Different flocks would shelter together at night and were sorted out at dawn by the sound of the shepherd's voice.

And all of this is so good, so comforting, so intimate. But then in John 10:16, Jesus says the most amazing thing: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." In context, most commentators suppose that Jesus is referring to the Gentiles. That was the issue of his day. He's speaking to Jews, and he tells them that he has other sheep, sheep other than them; that he must bring them also; and that they too will listen to his voice. In fact, one day they will all be one. And in fact Scripture is always saying this. To all trapped in thinking that is exclusivist, sectarian and divisive, Jesus comes saying over and over, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold."

Even in the Old Testament with its clear notion of Israel as God's chosen people, there were many, many righteous people who were not strictly Israelites. There was a king of Salem (ancient Jerusalem), Melchizedek, who was acknowledged as priest of God Most High. There was a man of Uz named Job. There was a prostitute of Jericho, Rahab. There was a Moabitess, Ruth. There was the noble Hittite, Uriah, shaming even King David with his honor and integrity. There was the Syrian commander, Naaman, who even after his encounter with the prophet Elisha and his healing from leprosy by Elisha would still find himself bowing down with his Syrian king in the temple of Rimmon (2 Kings 5:19). There is the Persian emperor Cyrus who is described in Isaiah 45:1 as "the Lord's anointed." And then in Jesus' day there was the Roman centurion of whom Jesus said, "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." There was the Canaanite woman in southern Lebanon who Jesus acknowledged had great faith. There was the Samaritan who turns out in one of Jesus' most famous stories to be the truly good person. And at the birth of Jesus, there were Magi, astrologers, likely Zoroastrian priests, men from the east who saw his star and grasped the significance of his birth long before anyone in Israel did. Always other sheep that are not of this fold.

What's more, we are reminded by our very own Scripture that all peoples on earth are to be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3); that one day all nations will stream up to the mountain of the Lord's temple and they will beat their swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:1-4); that one day the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9); that one day on the mountain top a feast of rich foods will be prepared for all peoples (Isaiah 25:6-9); that, yes, God brought Israel up from Egypt, but he also brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir (Amos 9:7); that the story of Cornelius is meant to teach us, as it did Peter, not to call anyone impure or unclean (Acts 10:28); that when Gentiles do by nature what God wills, it shows God's law is written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15); that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19); that we put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe (1 Timothy 4:10). Not to mention the huge multitudes of the saved in Revelation from every nation, tribe, people and language, and the glory and honor of the nations being brought into the New Jerusalem. And on and on. On and on.

I think back to how Jesus would answer the question, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" (as he did in Luke 13:23 ff.). He would talk of "a narrow gate." He would remind his listeners that many of them would miss it, that time for them was running out, that if they didn't

hear what he was saying they would suffer catastrophe at the hands of the Romans. And they did. Because they did not understand that he had other sheep not of their fold. But then he would say the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or it's like a little yeast in flour. It starts small and becomes immense. Yes, there may be weeping and gnashing of teeth for many in Jesus' audience, but (now in Luke 13:29), "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

And so, through Immanuel, God-with-us, we are always being invited into a larger story, a story in which all the other stories of justice, compassion and peace can one day fit, a story that has room for all the other wise stories of the world. And now with our centuries-long prejudices against those from the East and those from the South put to rest, we can all together work toward an earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord. His ideas are already out there written on human hearts. We can invest in his reign of justice, compassion and peace filling the earth. We can begin to see that Jesus came not so much to start a new religion as to launch a revolution of love and forgiveness, of understanding and compassion, worldwide. He came not so much to demand a set of doctrines and rituals for the few as to teach a way of being for everyone.

Jesus does really intend, as he said in John 12:32, to draw all people together – Asian, Hispanic, black and white, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist, American and Iranian, rich and poor, gay and straight. Many, many others – other sheep who are not of our flock whom Jesus will also bring. They will listen to his voice. And one day there will be one flock.

It is this understanding that people hunger for today. They fear that when they come to church the walls will close in on them and they will have to let go of all sorts of other things they know in their hearts to be true. But what if when they come through our doors they find people coming together open to multiple perspectives and to people who are not like us? People will come. And there will be a new world in the morning.

– Dale Pauls