

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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One Flock, One Shepherd

John 10:7-18

In God's church, the sheep need a shepherd. During this past year, that has become more true to me than ever before. As a pastor, I'm always shepherding. But circumstances brought onto our congregation by the coronavirus pandemic have deepened my sense of how God's people need to be led, cared for, and provided for. You rightly look to me, and to other leaders in our fellowship, to guide us through this reshaped reality.

But leaders, including myself, need to be led. In other words, I'm a shepherd who needs a shepherd. What's more, I'm also one of the sheep. Though standing at the pulpit, I'm also in the pew with you, as a member of the flock. I'm part shepherd, part sheep.

What holds all this together is the shepherding that Jesus is doing. He talks a lot about that in today's text from John. Behind Jesus' words is a long history of the relationship between God and his people. The rulers God provided for his people were often characterized as shepherds. They were responsible for watching over and promoting the good of the people. They were charged with pursuing justice and advancing righteousness in the life of the nation. Some did better at this and some did worse. In the Old Testament, there are lots of places where God pronounces judgment on false and evil rulers who have failed in governing his people rightly. They didn't shepherd the way God expected them to.

Through it all, there was an expectation that someday God himself, the shepherd par excellence, would come to gather and care for his scattered flock. He would establish his reign of justice and peace, tending to the injured and caring for the weak. And he would do so through the Messiah, a descendent in the line of David. So in our text, Jesus identifies himself with the people's expectations. He is the fulfillment of God's promises. "I am the good shepherd" (vv. 11, 14).

Part of what makes this shepherd good is the intimate bond that he maintains with us as his people, the church. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (v. 14). And notice that this bond Jesus has with us is grounded in his bond with the Father. Jesus the Son and God the Father are united in will, power, and purpose. They're one with each other. And this flows over into Jesus' oneness with the community of his followers. Jesus knows us, intimately and deeply, as human beings.

One commentator tells a story about a friend who is a farmer and expert sheep breeder. While he was at the county fair helping some kids, someone went into the barn on his farm and stole his sheep. He had some suspicion of who had done this, someone he knew from another county. Turns out that county's fair was two weeks later, so he went to the fair, entered the sheep barn, and the sheep started crying for him. He recognized his sheep, and realized that they had been retagged. Someone said to him, "Oh come on, are you going to tell me that you can recognize your sheep?" He said, "Absolutely, I know my sheep."¹

Jesus says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep" (vv. 14-15). Jesus' death is the basis for our existence as a congregation. It's the

basis for the whole worldwide community of those who confess him as Lord and Savior and live under his sovereignty. Jesus will soon say more about his death and its significance, but first he mentions that he has other sheep not of this sheep pen who must be brought in also. He's probably referring to sheep outside the fold of Judaism. In other words, there are Gentiles, non-Jews, who will listen to his voice and be joined to his flock. This is simply how it is when the community is being created and formed by the love of a God who goes in search of the lost. The kind of flock being gathered will, by God's very nature, be composed of diverse people.

Diverse, but one. "There shall be one flock and one shepherd," says Jesus (v. 16). Jesus has already said that he is "the gate for the sheep" (v. 7). He is the only way to enter this flock, this community gathered in his name. And just as he is the only way in, so this flock is held together by its confession of him as Lord and Savior. That's what unites this diverse community. It's what binds us to the congregation of Lutherans and the congregation of Methodists that sit on either side of our location this morning. It's what binds us to other congregations of Jesus' followers here in our community, throughout the state, across the nation, and around the world. We have one shepherd who has laid down his life for us.

This self-emptying love, which comes from the very heart of God, gathers lost sheep into a community where there's real and lasting life. Life that flourishes where oneness flourishes. Life and oneness that the world needs to see and know. I like the way that Francis Shaeffer puts it: "We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus' claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of oneness of true Christians. Now that is frightening. Should we not feel some emotion at this point?"²

In the context of our times, emotions are rising in response to all sorts of divisive issues, particularly around matters of race. You see it in the news you watch. You listen to it in policy debates. You follow it on social media. You hear it in your conversations. Especially during this past year, we've wrestled with events and experiences that have required an even deeper reckoning with how people of color have been treated in our nation. I realize these are volatile and painful matters, and I speak today as your pastor, the shepherd of this flock, a gathering of sheep who've all heard and responded to the same voice, the voice of the good shepherd, who laid down his life for us.

Remember that the good shepherd is always working to lead us to good pasture. He's always trying to take us in the direction of life. And for this flock called Grace Baptist Church, our journey toward more abundant life in Christ involves becoming a more multiracial congregation. Even now, we can rejoice and give thanks to God for how his presence and power are evident in the ways that he's gathering black individuals and white individuals into one flock. Racial diversity in the pews isn't just a sign of the times. It's a sign that the Lord is doing what he loves to do. He's shepherding. He's bringing others into the sheep pen. He's going out beyond boundaries that keep us from becoming more of what he intends us to be as his church.

As God gathers and tends this flock, there's always plenty of shepherding to be done. It takes vigilance and constant attention. A few years ago, a British newspaper reported on a flock of over 1,300 sheep that had to be rounded up in the Spanish city of Huesca. The source of the problem? A shepherd who had fallen asleep. The newspaper article said:

According to city authorities, the police were alerted to the presence of the extremely large flock attempting to negotiate the streets in the center of Huesca at around 4:30am on Tuesday when a local resident dialed Spain's 112 emergency number.

The dozing shepherd was meant to be keeping the animals in check outside the environs of the city while he waited for the clock to strike 7am, when he was due to guide the sheep northwards through Huesca towards Pyrenean uplands where his flock will graze during the hot summer months.

The police eventually found the herder, who was still peacefully slumbering. Together the embarrassed shepherd and police officers were eventually able to extract the sheep from the city and return them to their pastures.

Good shepherding requires watchfulness. In our text, Jesus speaks about the dangers of thieves and wild animals. The life of a flock isn't all green pastures and still waters (Ps. 23). Risks and perils abound. All kinds of things can threaten the life and oneness of the flock. So as God continues to lead our church in the righteous path of racial diversity, for his name's sake, we need to be vigilant. We need to stay on guard against attitudes that promote racial prejudice. We need to remain watchful about actions that divide us rather than unite us. Oneness in Christ doesn't just happen. It takes a congregation that's always on the lookout for things that would endanger or scatter the flock.

Our nation itself is already deeply fragmented and extremely scattered. As we've seen again this past week, our society continues to wrestle with the legacy of racial division and systemic injustice. But in the midst of all the strife and turmoil, remember that a church like ours, in a time like this, has a unique, God-given opportunity to be a vibrant witness that promotes reconciliation and healing, a community that contradicts sinful and destructive notions of racial superiority. In the words of one person who has done a lot of research and writing on multiracial churches,

... multiracial churches are to be places where every person's belovedness is embraced and celebrated; where every person is able to come to the table with their gifts and skills as leaders and contributors to advance the Good News of Christ; and where no form of supremacy other than the supremacy of Christ reigns.³

"There shall be one flock and one shepherd," says Jesus. That's both his promise and our purpose. Christ has called us to pursue oneness. Diversity is good and necessary. But diversity often just sits there on the surface of things, a thin kind of witness. Oneness is different. Oneness goes deeper and requires more. Oneness requires that we see ourselves more clearly in light of God's righteousness. Oneness requires that we turn away from ways that we disrespect or mistreat the image of God in others. Oneness requires that we have hard, honest conversations about difficult subjects. Oneness requires that we make sacrifices for the sake of the flock. Oneness requires that we share authority and power within the community of believers. Oneness requires that we reach across boundaries and build new relationships in unfamiliar territory. Oneness requires that we stay vigilant about the ongoing threats to our unity.

One flock, one shepherd. And that shepherd has already shown us how much this oneness matters. It matters so much that he has laid down his life and taken it up again, for the sake of the flock. And now, in our deeply divided world, he's still calling, still gathering sheep, still bringing them into this community of life.

¹ As told by Rolf Jacobson on Sermon Brainwave 781: Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 25, 2021. WorkingPreacher website. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/781-fourth-sunday-of-easter-april-25-2021> (April 21, 2021).

² Francis Shaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 34, No. 1).

³ Korie Little Edwards, "The Multiethnic Church Movement Hasn't Lived Up to Its Promise." *Christianity Today* website. February 16, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/march/race-diversity-multiethnic-church-movement-promise.html> (April 22, 2021).