

Sermon: Sheep Called by Name

Year B, Easter 4

[Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

We looked for a long time to find someone to be the Director of Faith Formation at this church. We looked at our community and saw how many families with kids there were and compared it with the church and saw how many families with kids there weren't. We looked at the resources we had in the church and looked at what it would take to figure out what those missing families might want or need, and we figured out we needed to hire someone to focus on them. We look at this morning's reading from the Gospel of John and we think, "Even Jesus is talking about the other sheep that don't belong to this fold, how there must be one flock, one shepherd." (John 10:16). And now Lindsey is here. And it is so, so tempting to think, "O.K. Lindsey, go round 'em up."

And if Lindsey could do all that on her own, she probably would. She's that kind of person. But that's not we're asking her to do. And that's not what the reading from John asking us to do.

The reading from the Gospel of John is talking about caring for a flock, caring for our communal well being. There are other places in the Bible, other places in the Gospel of John, where Jesus talks about caring for individual sheep. But here he is talking about the community of believers who know Jesus and whom Jesus knows. We are better as a community, less vulnerable to following people who abandon us at the first sign of trouble or the first sign of work, less vulnerable to being snatched away and scattered, we are better as a community when our fellowship is stronger. Our fellowship is strengthened when it is not only Jesus who knows us by name, but when we know each other by name. And by more than name.

The text from 1 John says *Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* (1 John 3:18). No thank you. Let's be polite. Let's be civil. But let's not love. Let's dole out parts of ourselves in stingy bits and pieces, keeping back our feelings and thoughts, and holding grudges.¹ Let's be afraid to confront each other, judge each other without mercy and set impossibly high standards for ourselves and each other.² Let's avoid making commitments to avoid risking exploitation or abuse.³ Because that's how the world works. If you love each other and take the action to back it up, that's when the wolves get you.

Jesus isn't denying that's the lived reality of this world. He's talking about hired hands and wolves for a reason. His community is under attack. Not by people who are offering a compelling counter argument to his proposals to love God and love our neighbors as the pathway to salvation, in this world and the next. The people who are endangering the kingdom of God are working to isolate individual believers and destroy the Beloved Community Jesus is building.

Jesus isn't denying the lived reality of this world. It's not easy to get what it means to be loved by a Good Shepherd. Jesus is talking about being totally loved and known by God. Totally

¹ Barbara J. Essex, "Fourth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, John 10:11-18" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 451.

² Essex, 451.

³ Essex, 451.

loved and known by Infinite Love and Ultimate Power. Jesus is talking about being loved and known, by someone who willingly gives up his life for ours (John 10:18). Even though we keep wandering off, following hired hands. Even though all we have to do is stay together. And we won't do it. That *is* hard to understand. Much easier to understand being polite and being civil and being guarded to avoid being vulnerable.

So we're sending Lindsey out on a scouting mission. We're asking her to help us find some other folks who are brave enough to look for fellowship for themselves and their families. They may not recognize that's what they're doing. So she's going to come back to us and say something like, "Well, they wouldn't put it this way, but here's why I think they're looking for fellowship." And whomever she finds, we're going to have to make some changes to our fellowship to make it possible for them to hear Jesus' voice. We're going to have to change the way we love and know each other.

And we're going to have to be vulnerable to each other. We're going to have to be vulnerable to strangers. We're going to have to ask for help, even though it will make us feel small because we're asking for help and we'd much rather be the ones giving help. Just when we get comfortable, we're going to find there's another group of people out there who are longing to hear Jesus' voice through our fellowship, but our fellowship doesn't speak at their frequency.

Because our flock has only one shepherd, Jesus Christ. Christ is the Word of God, the message of the self-giving love of God, who did not want the world to perish.⁴ The world is going to perish if we keep cutting ourselves off from each other, identifying ourselves by nation or class or race or gender or sexual identity.⁵ Keeping ourselves safe from the concerns of people who are different from us is keeping us from the concerns and needs of Christ's other sheep.⁶ It is cutting us off from hearing Christ's voice.

In the Gospel of John, there are a very few moments when Jesus calls someone by name. Jesus calls Lazarus out of his tomb. Jesus calls Mary by name on Easter morning. Calling someone by name is calling them to abundant life, in this world and the next.⁷ Living with the reality that Jesus is calling all of us by name, calling all of us to abundant life, changes reality. It makes true community, it makes fellowship, possible, in this world. No waiting around for the next.

We may think that there are a bunch of sheep just waiting to show up on Sunday morning and fit right into what we've got going on. And once we acknowledge that that's probably not realistic, we may start to get a bit tetchy about Lindsey constantly coming back from her scouting missions saying things like, "you know, if we changed this ..." Or "I know you're already super busy, but if we could do this too ..."

So remember this: Lindsey's ministry makes it possible for us to do what Jesus is calling us to do. She won't be perfect. She won't be 100% correct all the time. We need to challenge and argue and prioritize and compromise on just about everything she suggests. Just like we need to do on just about everything else we do, from fixing the steeple to rehearsing in New Beginnings.

⁴ Stephen A. Cooper, "Fourth Sunday of Easter, Theological Perspective, John 10:11-18" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 452.

⁵ Cooper, 452.

⁶ Cooper, 452.

⁷ Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 139.

But she has been called here, as a conservation biologist, to get us out of the boat, to get us into the fields with our fellow sheep. To get us to look at the thing that no other group can possibly offer, the fellowship with the Good Shepherd who loves us without limit, calling each of us by name. Jesus is calling us, by name, to abundant life. Let's share that reality with the world.