**Sermon for April 21 2024 John 10:11-18 “Invested”**

*Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”*

I have never forgotten the thrill, the luxurious feel, or the particular smell of my first Bible, the one I was given during my boyhood at the little church in Round Lake, NY. It had something that the bibles in the pews did *not* have…it had Jesus’ words all in red ink, just jumping off the page and into my young and open mind. I read the Bible very differently now than I did then, with more understanding but less youthful abandon. And there is something I did not notice at the time that is important to notice now, which is that all gospels are not created equal when it comes to the volume of red ink employed. Specifically, our gospel today, the gospel of John, is the red-ink leader by quite a margin, because in this gospel, Jesus talks at length about himself and his origins and his understanding of our role in the world, a world with which he is deeply invested and in love.

The passage we have heard today is *all* red letters, just seven little verses, but preaching material for hours and hours and hours of discussion. It is just too much material! And so for today, at least, we will leave aside speculation about who among us are hired hands and would abandon the flock. We will resist identifying and chatting about the wolves among us. We will save for another day the notion of laying down one’s life and then picking it up again. But among all those red letters, now well into our sixth decade of becoming *United* Methodists, I feel we must talk about our Good Shepherds assurance that he has other sheep in other folds, who will also listen to his voice, and that eventually God’s dream will come true, and there will be one flock under the loving leadership of one shepherd. God, you see, is invested in the *whole* creation, not just the Jewish part, or the Christian part, or the Muslim Part, or the Hindu part, or the more than half of Americans who now claim no religion at all. And Jesus, Lord of the Universe, despite our attempts to hog him all to ourselves, is *universally* invested. The single flock he desires to shepherd includes all of God’s created ones.

We use the word ‘ecumenical’ rather freely. As many of you know, it is a word we borrowed from the Greek, [*oikoumene*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oikoumene), which means "the whole inhabited world". And we envision a Christianity that spans the globe, with no real demand that it become all United Methodist, despite our own John Wesley having famously said, “the world is my parish”. I think Wesley, like us, was able to honor other sheep from other folds,( so long as they weren’t Calvinists!) and, in principle at least, all those who hear and respond to the voice of Jesus are welcome.

We need to understand this stuff because we United Methodists are poised at a time in human history, and our own denominational history, when relatedness within the [*oikoumene*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oikoumene) is both more essential and more challenging than ever before. We would expect some relational friction with other sorts of sheep, with different kinds of Christians, but we are experiencing quite a bit of challenge within our own United Methodist species, too! Here in California the fallout from the recent formation of the more conservative World Methodist denomination was not so great…across our jurisdiction we lost just one percent of our churches, yet in the Southeastern Jurisdiction? Like, from Kentucky to the Gulf of Mexico, and from Virginia down to the tip of Florida? *That* part of the world? 47 percent disaffiliation. This giant rift is all about biblical authority and interpretation and stuff that we in the West have frankly come to peace about, that some of our Christian brethren are gay and lesbian and non-heterosexual in assorted ways. We can giggle up our sleeves at their well-known devotion to the King James version of the Bible, collated and financed by one of history’s most flamboyant homosexuals, and *still* think, paradoxically, that the red-letter test might just be our way through all of this. Are we listening to the voice of Jesus, and not just to the worldly voices of division? Can we hear his call above our own discomforts and assumptions? And have we perhaps fallen in with the vague ones who argue virtually any moral point by saying, “well, it’s in the Bible somewhere!”

A useful tool is to be honest, not just generally, but about our assignment of “levels of authority” within the scriptures. Things written among the Hebrews may, for example, have less power for us than the writings of Paul, who may, in turn, have less power for us than the words of our own Shepherd. Is this true for you? I love the Bible, and I respect the Bible, whatever color the letters are, but as a Christian not under law but under grace, the tie-breaker for me is always what the Shepherd would say. We need a new bracelet, WWJS?

And so I suggest *this standard* for our consideration, knowing in advance that it is but one way of interacting among the many and various sheep that name themselves Christian.

The other bit of wisdom I would endorse is our denominational emphasis and the historical value we have placed on *pluralism*. Remember that word? Pluralism is the United Methodist confession that we are not all the same, we do not all believe the same, we do not all worship the same way, but that we can, through our connection to the Good Shepherd, be one lively flock together. Here is *really* what all the fuss is about: because our human spirit and mental capacity are not easily tethered, United Methodists have become more pluralistic than our more conservative brethren are comfortable with being. Additionally, our more liberal brethren, the Berkely Bunch, have often moved beyond authenticity into weirdness for its own sake, hidden among the skirts of respecting diversity and being good pluralists. And so we encounter friction and discord *from both edges* of our United Methodist family, a fractious discord we have created ourselves, but can still step back from if we have the willingness and ability to let our Shepherd lead, and listen to his voice within us, and accept that what Jesus says to you will necessarily be different than what Jesus says to me. If Jesus says to you, you need to stop buying so many accordions, we have a problem...

Our national stage is currently up to its eyebrows in former President Trump’s criminal trial, but it wasn’t too long ago that the trial about George Floyd’s death was concluded. The prosecuting attorney, Steven Schleicher, took an hour and forty-two minutes for his closing arguments, but the distillation is in this final paragraph: *This case is exactly what you thought when you saw it first, when you saw that video. It is exactly that. You can believe your eyes. It’s exactly what you believed. It’s exactly what you saw with your own eyes. It’s exactly what you knew. It’s what you felt in your gut. It’s what you now know in your heart. This wasn’t policing. This was murder.* This prosecuting attorney was delivering a very sacred message in that very secular setting; listen to your heart, listen to your inner voice. What he *didn’t* say, of course, what *we* all hold to be true, is that the inner voice in mentally healthy humans is simply the Holy Spirit within each of us, urging us towards the best, always.

The book [*Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/48508510)says thisabout ecumenism: “Finding common ground has been the necessary first step in ecumenical relations and activity. But the next step is to acknowledge and enjoy what God has done differently elsewhere in the Body of Christ. And if at the congregational level we are willing to say, 'I can't do everything myself, for I am an ear: I must consult with a hand or an eye on this matter,' I suggest that we do the same thing among whole traditions. If we do not regularly and programmatically consult with each other, we are tacitly claiming that we have no need of each other, and that all the truth, beauty, and goodness we need has been entrusted to us by God already. Not only is such an attitude problematic in terms of our flourishing, but in this context, we must recognize how useless a picture this presents to the rest of society. Baptists, Presbyterians, United Methodists, and Roman Catholics failing to celebrate diversity provide no positive examples to societies trying to understand how to celebrate diversity on larger scales.”

And there, right there, is the real friction…that in our inability to manage with one another, we weaken our Christian witness to the larger society beyond the walls of our sheepfold. Our society- let’s not be coy, here - is a zoo, right, and expects, from us, ideas and inspiration about getting along with one another and making sense of life. If we turn inward, endlessly squabbling about the finer points of this or that theology, we will lose them entirely…this zoo is not renowned for its long and patient attention span! And so we find ourselves with a very real structural need: we need to re-establish ecumenical stability because the lack of it dilutes and destroys our message to the world. Our world, for all of its strident noise about religion being useless, still has heart-aching needs for acceptance and love and belonging, but it will not share itself with a Christianity more devoted to bickering than to blessing. It will not share itself with a denomination more fascinated with disaffiliation than discipleship. If we desire to help God’s dream come true, to make Jesus’ prediction about one flock led by one shepherd come to be, there is only one way, really: one at a time, sheep by sheep, or goat by goat, or cat by cat, we are led to turn and respond again to the prompting words and guiding hand of our Good Shepherd. Jesus is invested in us, friends; we need to invest in one another. Amen.