

January 19, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
“Heart of Acceptance”
John 10: 14-17



Did you hear it? The scripture we just heard, we need to hear again. Jesus speaking to his followers said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. But they will listen to my voice. I must bring them, so there will be one flock.” I wish John 10:16 was the verse everyone knows and plasters everywhere. “John 10:16” could be the sign held up at sporting events. Does the guy with the rainbow wig still do that? Maybe we could get an important football player to write it in white ink on top of the black stripe underneath his eyes during the Super Bowl. Put John 10:16 on bumper stickers and Christian tee-shirts.

Let me translate. Jesus said, “You guys can see the sheep in your own pen. You see the others that look like you and baa like you and gather together with you to feed together. You know you are my flock, and you are. I’ll bet my life on it. What you might not know is I have other flocks too. I have others that gather at the sound of my teachings. They might not look like you or gather where you gather. They don’t make the same sounds like you do; their wool is differently colored than yours, but they hear my voice too. They hear my message too. You are all one flock, around one God. I bet my life on it.”

Christians know the Christ as Jesus of Nazareth, but people of other faiths - other flocks - they know the Cosmic Christ’s voice too. Maybe not in the Jesus of Nazareth experience, but in names familiar to them. God’s people are One.

Jesus said it, I believe it, That settles it. God’s people are One.

But, it isn’t that easy. If we hope to have any integrity in our faith, we can’t isolate a verse of scripture, apply our interpretation, and close off all dialogue. We know that there are others who read on in John to chapter 14 and pick up verse 6 to wield their belief. Jesus says “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” With that verse, they say only those who confess Jesus as personal Lord and Savior get to be with God and go to heaven.

Jesus said it, they believe it, that settles it - for them.

There is no doubt that the Gospel of John, that last gospel written, most likely written close to the end of the first century, is full of symbol and metaphor. This writing, as much as if not more than any other, must be read through the lens of historical context and literary imagery. Single verses must be read in the context of the whole if we are to begin to comprehend what John is saying to his community two thousand years ago and what John is saying to us today a world away.

John is speaking as a Jewish Jesus follower to his community of Jewish Jesus followers. They were a small minority with new understandings within the Jewish heritage.

They were struggling to claim their identity while living in the midst of the Hebrew tradition thousands of years old. John's gospel is "a confessional celebration of a particular community." ¹ John is writing to his community saying, "this is who we are. We are people who believe in the God [Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] who was revealed to our community decisively in Jesus. We listen for his voice. We follow in his way. If someone asks who are we? Tell them, we are people who follow the way Jesus taught.

Jesus is 'the way.' Within the Jewish wisdom tradition of Hebrew, "way" (Derek) means path. The Derek is the path in the wilderness. This faith community claims the path that Jesus shows denotes the path that will lead one to righteousness with God, to union with the will of God. The path Jesus shows is the way to living. It means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. That is the only way to experience God. To let go of our fearful, ego-driven, greedy path of self and embark on our trusting, peace-driven, generous path of Love.

Jesus shows that way- the way -where we can be transformed into love beings. A Hindu professor was asked about this verse and its common use as justification for Christian exclusivity. He was challenged by those who maintain the interpretation of this verse that says only Jesus or rather only Christians have the path to God and eternal life. All others are damned for all eternity they say. They said but what about ... the way, truth and life ...? The professor answered, "this verse is absolutely true- dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being- is known in all of the religions of the world." The way of Jesus is a universal way, known to millions who have never heard of Jesus. ²

Jesus taught the way to live as mindful, compassion, justice, love, generosity and care for others. That is the only way anyone can unite with God. Jesus did not replace Judaism with Christianity. Jesus was never a 'Christian'. He was born, circumcised, baptized Jewish. He regularly worshiped in the synagogue; he studied the Torah scriptures; he visited the Temple, spent time in prayer and kept the Jewish feasts. Jesus lived and died Jewish. ³ Today ignorant, people paint hate symbols on houses of worship of his Jewish faith or his cousins, Muslim shrines. A young man - who does not understand- painted a swasticka on the Jewish temple in Lincoln this week. He does not understand so much. "Father forgive him for he knows not what he is does." A swasticka is an ancient Hindu symbol of the divine. It was corrupted in our generations into a symbol of hate. People who would do such a thing have not understood the way of Jesus. He didn't understand that Jesus rejected hatred of others. He doesn't know that Jesus rejected acts of violence. Jesus rejected hypocrisy of religious leaders and arrogance in the kind of religion that was outward and ceremonial - full of law

¹ Gail R.O'day. "The Gospel of John" *New Interpreters Bible Vol IX*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995. P. 742.

² Marcus Borg. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible seriously But Not Literally*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001. P. 216.

³ Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*. Geneva: World Council of Churches. 1985 p.

and dogma and devoid of spiritual meaning that could change hearts. He challenged those leaders of his faith -and all others who did not live authentic lives of love and acceptance.

“I have other sheep in other flocks. They hear me too. They respond to the message that I speak. When all my flocks respond to God’s way of love, truth of life, there will be one flock.” The flock may use different languages to speak of the divine; it might not all believe the same, but it will LIVE the same. It will be one flock that follows the way of compassion, service, justice by Living the way that teaches prayer and spiritual practices for acceptance and transformation. The way that no longer divides, but the way that makes all one in Divine truth of love.

For John and his community, Jesus is God’s word. There is no line of separation between Jesus and the God of which he speaks.⁴ That’s how John’s Mediterranean community understood Jesus. The message and the messenger were one. Jesus said, “²⁰On that day you will know that I am in God, and you in me, and I am in you.” John presents union for all, not division.

A Christian missionary to India was in dialogue with some Hindu’s regarding their Christian testimony of Jesus. The missionary was told, “the Hindus will not separate the preacher from the message, the evangelist from the gospel, the truth from its manifestation. .. ‘how can we believe what is said, unless we see its effects on the one who says it? ... long-established Indian tradition that the person and the message he or she lives cannot be separated. This is a simple but profound rule of the thumb used in India- if it is a good message that you preach, it must be both heard and seen!’”⁵ It seems as though the Hindu culture have a good understanding of the way Jesus’ teaches; they are part of the flock.

What would it be like if the sheep quit paying so much attention to needing to be the only ones Jesus gives new life, and quit focusing on the diversity of cultures which hears the shepherd’s voice and started listening to the voice and its teaching?

What would it be like for a Christian church that occupies an entire block right smack in the middle of a downtown MID-West city to create a space where Christians and Jews and Hindus and Buddhist and Muslims and those seekers who lay claim to no organized religion - what if there was a space where all the flocks of God’s people could come together. We could pray and meditate together. We could share in mindfulness practices and spiritual teachings of wholeness for body, mind and soul. It could be a place where the way and truth and life of the Cosmic Christ brought people together in community of hearts of acceptance instead of dividing them with walls of opposition.

It could be a way of making friends of multiple spiritual backgrounds- genuine friendships where we can learn from one another- not debate who is right and who is wrong.

⁴ Gail R. O’Day, *Ibid.*

⁵ Wesley Ariarajah. p. 52

We can learn how the voice of the good shepherd was heard by each other's faith ancestors. We could grow richer in sharing the wisdom of the Creator as we sit with one another, as we move our bodies, as we pray or draw or make sound. It can be a seed of hope for the future of God's people planted in the rich soil of the heartland of this nation.

That is our vision here. Saint Paul UMC - in this beautiful sacred space - can change the world - by enlarging our circle of community. Next month, we will open space where all the flocks of God's beloved may intersect on spiritual paths of wholeness. We decided to call it Óran Mór: Wholistic Center. Óran Mór is an ancient celtic story of creation:

Quiet— Eternal Quiet. Not even the sound of the restless, stirring, dark waters could be heard. Then, a great spiraling strain of Melody moved across the endless waters. Subdued at first, then quickly gathering momentum until it reached a great crescendo. And, then, there was Life! But the Melody did not stop. It continued its song, filling all of Creation with its divine harmony. And so it continues today, for all those who listen.

The primordial myth of Creation, common to all people, tells of a mighty melody – the very breath of the primordial god – that sang Creation into existence. To the Celts it was known as the Óran Mór, “The Great Melody” a melody that did not cease with the initial creation, but goes on and on and on, inspiring Creation along its holy pilgrimage of giving and receiving blessing...

In this fragmentation, we have lost our way, our holy nature, and have profaned the holiness of both Creation and the Creator. We have failed to live up to our potential as co-creators, with the divine, and in so doing have compounded the profanity and brokenness of a holy Creation. However, all is not lost. Deep within each of us lies a yearning for our lost (w)holiness.

Our faith tradition, our holy scriptures, tell the story of our human brokenness, our lostness, our exile. Other cultures tell that story too. Our Judeo-Christian story is about finding the way, the truth, the life of returning to our wholeness. Other cultures tell that story too. May we gather in the Great Melody of Divine love, the flocks of all people and journey in love to the Center.