

**BEING CHRISTIAN AMONG MANY FAITHS:
OTHER SHEEP NOT OF THIS FOLD**

John 10:11-18

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on April 13, 2008, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

John 10:11-18

“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.”

In 1990, I accepted the call to become Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. My predecessor was Dr. Calvin de Vries, who had served the congregation for over a decade leading up to his retirement the year before I arrived. Some of you knew him.

Cal de Vries was one of the most learned preachers in our denomination. Up until his death a few years ago, in his early nineties, he continued to read extensively in theology, the arts, and contemporary politics and culture.

In reading some of his sermons, I saw a sophisticated argument challenging that solidly Presbyterian congregation we both served to be open to the possibility that God works in and through religions other than Christianity. He put forth the possibility that God might in fact extend his vast grace to those who died before the time of Christ and to those who have not yet heard of or confessed Christ as Lord and Savior.

I reacted in several ways, some of which are in tension with one another.

- My less-theologically-developed mind sometimes had trouble following his argument.
- My desire to be open-minded, to affirm the value of every human being, and to be open to the world took heart from his sermons.
- Yet my sense of orthodoxy often held me back, with passages like “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”¹ buzzing uncomfortably in my ears, like the sound of a fluorescent light about to go out.

The tension I felt between “the wideness in God’s mercy” and the orthodox importance of confessing Christ as Lord and Savior has remained with me for many years.

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After the shock of 9/11 began to wear off, I felt what many clergy and laypeople in our country felt: a heightened awareness of how little we knew about Islam, and a sense that even though we had been attacked by radical adherents of that faith, an attack to which we needed to respond militarily, a faith we needed to understand better as well. In that small Midwestern city, leaders of the Christian community, the local synagogue, and, yes, the local mosque began to travel a road together, seeking common understanding, with some success.

Three years later, I moved to Alexandria, and immediately stepped into the longstanding, warm relationship Westminster has with Agudas Achim, the Conservative Synagogue a few blocks away. My awareness of the tension between “the wideness in God’s mercy” and personal faith in Christ as the way into that wideness has grown beyond both an academic interest in a predecessor’s learned sermons and a patriotic interest in how understanding religious pluralism might help make our country safer.

¹ John 14:6.

So I stand before you today, ready to begin a series of sermons entitled “Being Christian Among Many Faiths.” I plan to preach five sermons over the next six weeks on this challenge. At each step in this series, I hope to relate not only to high-minded theology, but also to life in our neighborhood, our community, our nation, and our world as we interact, almost daily, with Christians, Muslims, Jews, and people of any number of faiths rooted in history and cultures across the world and in which we are more aware of the varieties of religious experience among all God’s children than we have been aware at any point in our history.²

Let us pray: God of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Galilee, Athens, and Rome, open our hearts and minds to the wideness in your mercy and to the tremendous window into that mercy we receive in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

As I have previously shared with you, growing up in the almost exclusively Christian suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee, dominated religiously by Southern Baptists, the formative theological question of my high school years was “Am I a Christian if I have not had a dramatic conversion experience?”

Over several decades of preaching and teaching, a major way I have come to answer that question to my satisfaction is through the discovery a few years ago of an alternative translation to Romans 3:22. In the alternative translation, which appears as a textual note in your pew Bible, Paul promises that the righteousness of God has been disclosed to us not so much through our “faith *in* Jesus Christ” (the first translation), but rather through “the faith – or faithfulness – *of* Jesus Christ” (the second translation). In other words, we are justified by Christ not because of our faith in him, but because of his faithfulness to God through his life, death, and resurrection. We are saved by what God does in Christ, not by our ability to believe in him or to feel his presence. Our salvation is about God, not about us.

I have been comforted as well by a basic doctrine of our Reformed Heritage given voice by Karl Barth. The doctrine is embodied in the phrase “the sovereign freedom of God.”³ This phrase reminds us that God is both all-powerful (sovereign) and free. God has the *power* to save everyone that the decision whether or not to exercise that power is a *free* choice that rests squarely with God. Again, it’s about God, not about us.

In a lunch several years ago with Rabbi Jack Moline, of Agudas Achim, I remember saying:

As a Presbyterian, I do not know for sure who is saved and who is not; that decision rests with God alone. But based on everything I know of God from the Bible, from the life and teaching of Christ, and from my experience of the presence of God through the Holy Spirit, I cannot help but trust that that in the end, God will figure out a way to bring everyone to himself. If he does so, then I, as an orthodox Christian, believe it will somehow be through the life and death and resurrection of Christ.

Jack said: “Hmm. That’s the same thing George Pera said.” Again, I was reassured, as George is one of my predecessors here.

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A verse in our lectionary passage for today has helped me get to this point of believing that God may indeed choose to extend his grace even to those who have not confessed his name. In the passage before us, Jesus labels himself “the good shepherd” and describes all that he does:

- “The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...[T]he sheep follow him because they know his voice.”
- “The good shepherd lays down his life 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.”

This is one of the most comforting passages in all of Christian literature. It describes the relationship between Christ and those who believe him, who profess his name, and who seek to follow him with their lives. “I am the good shepherd.”

² Informing this series will be a recent book by Dr. Cynthia M. Campbell, President of McCormick Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Chicago, entitled *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, translated by Edward T. Oakes, S.J., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 131.

Yet in the midst of this warm and intimate passage, Jesus says: “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.”

At the very moment Jesus describes the intimacy between himself and his followers, he suddenly reminds us that we are not the only people to whom he relates. “I have other sheep not of this fold.”

Think of it this way.

Imagine that you have been invited to a family reunion at a state park in the Midwest. The family matriarch has convened this reunion, and invited your siblings, your parents, your cousins – a hundred or so people from all over the world.

On the final night of the reunion, she gathers everyone around her, and she dispenses blessings, charges, bits of wisdom, bits of affection.

Suddenly, she looks at her watch, and say: “I have to go; I have other sheep, not of this fold, other persons for whom I am responsible, not in this family.” And she leaves.

Her action startles you. Perhaps it angers you. But it doesn’t have to....can’t you be proud and inspired that the matriarch of your family has other sheep not of your fold?

Where I have ended up on this issue, at least today, is contained in the words of *The Study Catechism* approved for use and study in the Presbyterian Church. In answer to question 49, the catechism states:

No one will be lost who can be saved. The limits of salvation, whatever they may be, are known to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.⁴

“I have other sheep not of this fold.”

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This is the first in a sermon series, and by necessity the practicalities will vary from week to week. Let me close today with this direction toward applicability:

I trust that most of us in this Sanctuary desire to accept and affirm people no matter what their faith might be.

My hunch is that this desire arises as much out of our civic belief that “all [people] are created equal”⁵ as out of our religious belief that God’s mercy may ultimately extend to all.

What I am proposing today is the possibility that such acceptance can come from a source deeper than our citizenship. It can come from our own belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as Good Shepherd who has other sheep not of this fold. If I am correct in this belief, then we can affirm those whose faith differs from ours – friends and neighbors, colleagues and family members, those who sit next to us at PTA and those who play on our soccer team – in a way that grows directly out of our confession of Christ as Lord and Savior. The Good Shepherd who knows *our* voice and calls *us* by name has *other sheep* as well, sheep not of our fold.

Such acceptance can lead us in all our dealings – political, personal, familial – to affirm every human being as a child of God, worthy of the respect our Savior provides as shepherd.

Amen.

⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Study Catechism*, Question 49.

⁵ *The Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776.