

Sermon: Love Like This

New North Church

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Based on **John 10:11-18; Acts 4:5-12**

Chapter 10 in John's Gospel is a complicated bit of writing. In it, Jesus tells two related stories that may or may not be parables. In the first one Jesus says he is the gate to the sheepfold, followed by the one we just read, where he is now the shepherd. Both stories present Jesus in different but equally true roles.

His audience is a group of Pharisees, and it's no surprise his words divided them.

Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd.' Read literally, he said, 'I am the shepherd – the good one.' We can also think of the *good* shepherd as the *model* shepherd, the one we should all imitate. The good shepherd understands the risks involved and does the job anyway, even if he might someday lay down his life for the sheep. Compare him to the hired hand who works for money and for whom the sheep don't matter.

Let's go back to our first reading. Commonly called the Fifth Gospel, Acts is not an epistle per se. It was originally part of Luke's Gospel, and it too is addressed to his good friend, Theophilus.

Today's reading spills over from the previous chapter in which Peter and John healed a lame beggar at one of the Temple gates the day before, healing him in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Then Peter made a speech in Solomon's Portico, calling for repentance and reminding everyone that Moses said, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet' like him. Peter spoke of Jesus as being that prophet, and that was it – 'the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead' (4:1-2). So, they arrested them.

Rather than praise Peter and John for their good work of healing a lame beggar, the powers that be were angered by talk of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. By what name did they do this? They did it 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, [...] crucified, whom God raised from the dead.'

In the Gospel reading, the good shepherd knows his own and his own know him. What interests me is when Jesus said, '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' (10:16).

Shock of shocks: Jesus has other sheep. '*This fold*' refers presumably to those in Israel who already believe in Jesus, and these he will defend with his life. Other flocks might include the Gentiles who are also coming to believe in him. From John's point of view, people are coming to Jesus from everywhere.

Remember, they're all part of the Roman Empire and people from were on the move. Any one of them could have heard about Jesus at anytime, anywhere.

The point is, these other sheep may not be like us in how they look or in how they take their coffee, but, like us, they listened to Jesus, and he will lead them and look for them if they are lost, just as he would do for any of us. All Jesus ever wanted was to bring us into one flock with him as our shepherd.

Like John's Gospel, the world is a complicated place, despite our good intentions to make it otherwise. Conflict and violence affect everyone in one way or another. Wars and civil wars *rage* – that's the only good word for it – they rage in the Middle East, in Africa, Central America, South America, Asia; you name it.

And war is hardly ever an *Us vs. Them* situation anymore either. The number of armed groups involved in the Syrian civil war alone has risen from eight to several thousand since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011.¹

Causes range from cultural and social differences to political maneuverings, though some have their roots in religion, which is a sad historical truth.

Religious dissension shaped this nation as much as warfare ever did. Before there were Puritans in Plymouth, there were Roman Catholics in New Spain, which included what is now Mexico, the American Southwest, and California. In the early 1700s, Catholic missions flourished in New France, which extended from Newfoundland to the Canadian Prairies and from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico, including the Great Lakes. In both New Spain and New France, relations with the various native peoples were rocky and prone to violence when conversion proved to be an unwanted benefit of the missionaries' work. Then Great Britain started pushing them out.

The English Reformation brought settlements to Virginia and Plymouth. The Jamestown colony was more interested in turning a profit but the group of Pilgrims who settled in Plymouth carried with them a more moral vision, and they established what became known as the Puritan Way, which was based on a covenant of grace.

Puritanism became the dominant religion in the two Massachusetts colonies plus most of Connecticut. Over time, alternatives to Puritanism arrived, namely Baptists, Quakers, and Presbyterians. Roger Williams, called by one scholar an ‘excruciatingly thorough’ Puritan preacher, ended up in Rhode Island partly because he couldn’t keep his opinions to himself and partly because he was seeking religious freedom. Ironically, he was looking for ‘the genuine church of the apostles.’²

The United States is known for religious freedom, tolerance, and respect, if not total acceptance. These days, the nation is home to hundreds if not thousands of religious groups based on the so-called Abrahamic Traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many are splinter groups of larger organizations that often merge and split again.

In a competitive society, churches offer a sense of identity, security, and community, especially for immigrants new to the country, from the early English, Scots, Dutch, Swiss, and German immigrants from the Reformed traditions to the later wave of Irish, Italian, and Romanian Catholics; Jews from Ukraine; and Orthodox Catholics from Greece and Russia. It turns out that we’re not so much a melting pot as we are a flavorful stew of faith traditions.

Given all that, then, what have we learned in 2000 years?

We like to say that there are many paths up the mountain to God, and we like to say that because it’s true. Luke tells us there is salvation in no one else. In John’s Gospel, Jesus and God, Son and Father, are one and the same, so when he speaks of one, he means them both; Jesus is Emanuel – God with Us. So, there are many paths to Jesus, and no one path is better or righter than any other.

In John’s essay that we call First John, in the portion we didn’t read today, he wrote, ‘this is God’s commandment, that we should believe in the *name* of his Son Jesus Christ’ – as did the lame beggar in Acts – and ‘love one another’ (1 John 3:23).

John also wrote that we know love in the fact that Jesus laid down his life for us, and that we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Let us love, he said, in truth and

action. May we let our lives be an expression of our love for Jesus and for each other.
And with a love like that, all may be one.

Amen.

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¹ <https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>

² Noll, Mark A., ed. *A history of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 58-59.