

Other Folds, Other Sheep

Not long ago I had different conversations with different groups of people in which the same topic came up. And it wasn't the kind of topic that you'd expect to come up—not like the economy, or H1N1 flu, or anything on the news or in the media right now—it was a spiritual topic, a theological topic. And when I saw that same topic coming up in the scripture readings for today, I thought “Hm. I wonder if God is telling me what the sermon ought to be this week....”

The topic that came up was the question of whether non-Christians can be saved. We ran into it at the Men's Bible Study on Wednesday morning. And before that, in a completely separate context, a young person in our parish put it even more poignantly, asking “Are my Jewish friends going to go to hell?” That's a difficult question for Christians to answer. And it's been a difficult question for Christians for centuries. And part of what makes it difficult is that our scriptures seem to give us different and conflicting answers.

One kind of answer comes from our reading from Acts today. Peter is explaining to the Temple authorities why he is preaching and teaching and healing in the name of Jesus, and he says “There is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” That proclamation that there is no other saving name than Jesus has been taken by generations of Christians to mean only those who call upon the name of Jesus can be saved, and of course the only ones who call upon the name of Jesus are Christians, therefore only Christians can be saved. Those who do not call upon the name of Jesus—or, worse yet, those who do not even know the name of Jesus—are outside the circle of salvation, they are lost, they are condemned, they're going to hell. That is a position formally known as “Christian exclusivism,” and it has its good points and its bad points. The belief that calling on the name of Jesus is the only way to be saved has inspired countless Christians to acts of evangelism and mission-work, truly selfless acts by people who have gone out into strange and difficult and dangerous places to preach good news, and to plant churches, and to create communities of compassion and caring and calling on Jesus' revelation of God's saving love. Much good has come into the world through people who believed that everyone must call upon the name of Jesus to be saved.

But that kind of Christian exclusivism has had its darker side, too. Believing that everyone must call upon the name of Jesus easily tips over into believing that those who *don't* call upon the name of Jesus, those who *won't* call upon the name of Jesus, are bad, they are evil, they are our enemies. Christian exclusivism has led all too often to religious warfare, crusades, pogroms, forced conversions, religious violence. There are stories from church history of missionaries who would convert a pagan king, and then all the king's subjects were forced to be baptized at the point of a sword. There are stories of missionaries in China who would promise the poverty-stricken peasants rice—so long as they came to the church and listened to the sermon. There are stories from Minnesota, where I served before coming to Trinity, of Native American children taken from their families and put into residential schools, and forced to speak English, and forbidden to speak Lakota and Ojibwe and their native languages, and beaten if they were caught singing the songs or telling the legends their parents and grandparents had taught them—and all because “they were Christian now” and had to leave all those non-Christian things behind. Christian exclusivism has inspired truly selfless acts of mission and compassion; but it has also produced shameful episodes in the story of the people of Christ. It's a deeply problematic point of view—and it's problematic not just for church history, but problematic for *us*, when it makes us ask truly painful questions like “Are all my Jewish friends going to go to hell?”

But Christian exclusivism is not the only attitude toward non-Christians that we find in our tradition, or in our scriptures. Our reading from the Gospel of John today has a verse that seems to point in a very different direction: 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.” Like so many of Jesus' sayings, this one can be interpreted in subtly different ways. Some people think that Jesus here is saying something very like what Peter says in Acts: that the other sheep in other folds must hear the voice of Jesus *by becoming Christian*, in essence by coming to us and joining our fold. But others interpret Jesus' saying in a wider way—that the other sheep have their appropriate places in their other folds and don't need to come be just like us to hear Jesus' voice—and that's the way I interpret the saying, too.

I think that what this saying can mean for us is that the truth Jesus taught us Christians can be found in other people's truths as well. Jesus revealed to us God's Word, God's wisdom and God's love; and having learned to recognize God's wisdom and love in Jesus, we can now look and see that same wisdom and love in many places, many people, everywhere we turn. We as Christians can look at Jews or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or Sikhs or shamans or scientists or agnostics or atheists—we as Christians can look at others, and wherever we see wisdom and love we can be assured we are seeing the salvation Jesus calls us to see. Think of what John says in our Epistle today: "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth." Love is the sign of Jesus' truth; and wherever we see genuine love in real action, we are seeing the truth of saving grace. I like the way C.S. Lewis put it in one of his essays: that we Christians know that Jesus is saving us through the Gospel and Baptism and Communion and Church; what we don't yet know is how Jesus is saving everybody else.

And if that's true—if other sheep in other folds truly hear the divine voice even if they don't hear it the same way we do—if that's true, that says something to us about our faith and our devotion to Jesus, too. It tells us that the measure of our faith is not how exclusive we are about Jesus, but the measure of our faith is how willing we are to see the wisdom and love that Jesus revealed, revealed in all kinds of extraordinary, unexpected, surprising places. It says to that young person who raised the question, "No: your Jewish friends are not going to hell." But more importantly even than that, it tells us that there are things about God and wisdom and love and truth that we Christians can learn from encountering people of other faiths and other ways. When I was studying at Vanderbilt University, the New Testament professor there was a Jewish woman, Amy-Jill Levine, and she brought out aspects of the Jewish background of the Gospels I never would have guessed at otherwise. One of my theology teachers, John Cobb, wrote about his interfaith academic dialogue with Masao Abe, a Japanese Buddhist—and how that encounter with Buddhist philosophy and meditation sent Cobb back to his own Christian theology and prayer with a deeper understanding and a deeper devotion. John S. Dunne—an American Jesuit, not the English poet—wrote a book about his pilgrimage to Ayasofya in Istanbul, an ancient building whose name means "Holy Wisdom," a building that now is a museum, but before that was a mosque, and before *that* was a church; and in his book Dunne says that his encounter with the non-Christian wisdoms enshrined in that building helped him appreciate more deeply the Wisdom he first learned from the Gospel of Christ. At home on my bookshelf I have a book called *Jesus and Buddha*, and all it is is a series of sayings of Jesus taken from the Gospels on the left-hand pages, and sayings of the Buddha taken from the Sutras on the right-hand pages—and I am amazed at how often those different sayings are pointing to the same deep truths. In so many ways, Jesus' saying about other sheep in other folds invites us to look for the wisdom and love that Jesus revealed, being revealed in times and places and people far and near, like us and unlike us, Christian and non-Christian, wherever wisdom is genuine, wherever there is love, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. In so many ways, Jesus' saying invites us to go beyond Christian exclusivism and to embrace gratefully and joyfully the recognition of God's universal love.

And so I have a homework assignment for your prayers and devotions this week: Sometime this week, arrange your own encounter with another faith. Last week Lee and I went to a service at Temple House of Israel, and experiencing their synagogue worship illuminated for me parts of our church worship—you know, so many of our prayers are based on the same psalms. I invite you to seek out opportunities like that for yourself this week. Ask to be invited to a synagogue service. Stop by the Baha'i house on Lewis Street. Read a book about Islam. Recite some poems by Rumi or Hafiz or another Sufi mystic poet. Sit *zazen* for twenty minutes, following the breath, in the Buddhist meditative way. Stand outside and pray, facing the four directions, as Native American wisdom teaches. Do *something* to take you out of your Christian comfort zone—and when you do, keep the eyes of your heart open, to see if you don't recognize the wisdom and love that Jesus reveals coming to you in that new way, too. See if your encounter with wisdom and love in another faith doesn't make your Christian faith even stronger for you.

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." Let it be our prayer today that we may learn to recognize the Good Shepherd's voice, wherever, whenever, and through whomever it calls. Amen.