

The Fourth Sunday of Easter- 25 April 2021; Acts 4:1-12; 1st John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Seems to me I spend time trying to remember names of people from years ago more often now. That happened again this week – trying to remember someone I knew 30 years ago. All I can remember is that it was a variation of the name "Hatfield." I remember that, because he was related to the famous Hatfields and McCoys.

For him that was a bit of humor in his history. He was a preacher - of the Independent Fundamental Baptist sort. He believed that the only correct Bible is the King James Bible. And he was a friend.

Dixie Behnken was another friend. He also was a preacher - but his "flavor" of Christianity was Charismatic. It was normal for him in a worship service to "speak in tongues" that is languages he never learned by studying. He never did that when we worshiped together - but I knew that was a concession on his part for the others who were there with him.

The three of us even shared leadership in a worship service regularly. We spoke honestly about what we believed from the pulpit - and celebrated both those places we agreed, and where we didn't. We were even comfortable enough to say that we believe the others were wrong about some things...but we did that gently.

Bert Duncan - another friend. A Roman Catholic priest from Chicago. His real name was Francis, but we called him Bert. He got that name because of a coffee cup that he bought had that printed on it - and somehow Bert just fit him a lot better. Actually Bert was a mentor of mine - someone who taught me a lot of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I started thinking of these men when I read the words, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Before I started thinking about them though - there were some other things that were brought to mind.

Like who Jesus meant as the "other sheep". The traditional understanding is that Jesus was referring to those who weren't Jewish. That is probably the most accurate.

The other for those first disciples was anyone who was not Jewish - anyone who didn't have the right bloodline. We experience those "other sheep" differently from them.

We might start with "other sheep" being Christians in other lands. Years ago, when we thought about other countries and the need for sharing the Gospel - we thought about "backward" people - which we were going to bring the gospel to. And often that meant we also were trying to make them be like us.

Today, it is very different. The U.S. is now considered one of the largest mission fields in the world. Europe, the place many of us – and definitely most of the Christian denomination in the US look to for our roots – is the second largest.

I met with some of those kinds of other sheep a few years ago, when I went on a trip to meet Lutheran Christians in Serbia who are Slovak in heritage. And I have some wonderful pictures from that. Chris and I would love to go back there.

Glory will be passing on some information shortly about the Christians in India that we help to support. This great blessing for us grew out of her personal relationships. There are others as well that the saints of Our Saviours have supported...but I think is the one that has the deepest personal roots for someone in the congregation.

These other sheep of Jesus - truly are different from us - but we can learn from them - because they follow the same shepherd - Jesus.

Christians in other countries experience life differently from us. That seems rather obvious. So that means they think about some things differently as well. And yet, the other sheep Jesus has, who do not belong to our fold - what we might consider our group, are his sheep.

Jesus sees them as his - and so we are connected. This is why it is important for us to keep those connections alive. This is why the NALC has relationships with not only other Christians in the US, but also Lutherans in other countries – as you well know, since you have helped as well with a seminary in Africa.

Other sheep - who else might this be? Well, I kinda told you at the beginning of the sermon - Christians in other churches. Often I think that those of you in the pew are closer to understanding this than preachers.

There are bible studies some of you attend that have a different Christian faiths represented.

After worship last week – at the church council meeting – because of a mention in the sermon, we lightly discussed what our backgrounds are. A little about the faith people grew up in, but more in depth we talked about where each of us was born.

But that suspicion isn't here... My personal estimate is that more than half of those here were originally not Lutheran. So perhaps, one of the blessing of this congregation is that you don't look at other Christians as so "foreign".

Different fold - but the same shepherd.

Other folds??? Other groups of followers of Jesus? I wonder – other things as well?

Perhaps some might think:

Second service - guess they just can't get up in time to start the day right.

First service - getting it done early - so they can have the rest of the day - not really going to rest, are they.

As we look at each other do we think of them as "other?"

We look around our own church sometimes as different flocks - and even within a service - there may be smaller groups - insiders and outsiders. Welcomed in and not invited. Allowed to sit - but no one goes out of their way to talk with them. How often that happens that those who are the "other" are left outside and alone.

Jesus' others, who are they?

All of these, and more. Most of us here don't have experience as actual shepherds of sheep - the only things that we know about them tend to come from the pictures that we have from various Bible stories.

This we know, Jesus came as the good shepherd.

He came in order to bring all people - all those who are scattered and separated - to bring them together. What makes Jesus the good shepherd is not all the rules that he followed - nor even the teaching that he gave. No, what makes him the good shepherd is that he was willing to do something that probably no real shepherd was - he was willing to lay down his life for ALL people.

Then it narrows down some - it becomes those who become part of his flock - that is those who look to him as their leader and shepherd.

The cross - which his opponents thought would be the means of silencing Jesus really became how it was broadcast who he was.

What is more than that - it is through his resurrection that it became known that this really was doing the will of the Father - and not just his own idea.

Now, real power is his. He lay down his life, so that he could take it up again in resurrection. And because of that he can give to his sheep - those that hear him and follow him an abundance of life.

Other sheep - this starts from the Good Shepherd - Jesus. He is the source and the cause.

The identifying marks of his cross and resurrection - what shows us that he is actually the Good shepherd are so unique and captivating that we cannot mistake Jesus for any other. We know him, and he knows us.

From believers in Madagascar - in Haiti - and the believers in India - to the Methodists and followers of Jesus in town who don't claim a denomination, but attend other churches. These follow the same shepherd. Those sitting in the same church with you - or those that sit at a different time than you, also have the same shepherd.

And to include those who in some way feel wounded by other Christians who are afraid to come to a church - and now those who join us through the internet - become part of our community.

And it is he who gives us abundant life - already today. In a world where everyone wants to be the leader, wants to be in charge...in a world where people are always demanding their rights, and wanting to turn privileges into rights...in a world where passions call for self preservation - Christians have a different instinct ingrained in them. Jesus calls that faith.

The sheep - the followers of Jesus know their shepherd - their leader is really a master servant. The sheep knowing that their shepherd is also servant, have internalized the value of servanthood. We are followers.

Following is not an act of blind, dumb obedience. Good followers are knowledgeable. They know exactly what they are following. That is what makes them so good at following.

This doesn't mean that there aren't "leaders" in the church. But all of the leaders really are followers - of Jesus. And that is why there can be those different groups - Here they are called folds.

Church leaders lead by following Jesus, and calling others to do the same. The problem is we, in our weakness, somehow believe that that has to look identical. But the key really is knowing and following Jesus - listening to his voice.

And so - we are gathered as a servant community. A community that believes in hospitality. This kind of faith...this servanthood means that like Jesus we have to be connected with other people.

Following Jesus cannot be a private thing...and it cannot be just a private small club of a fold. The joining together as a church - becoming a body is all part of the abundant life that Jesus gives. In the smaller group - what is here called the "fold", we of necessity become more and more aware of the larger - what here is called the "flock".

And so, in this mutual care, we begin to live out love in truth and action, as he did for us.

A final small note - if you are interested in a list of ministries and how to contact them that the North American Lutheran Church is involved with in our country and beyond - I have printed out copies of them and their contact in the back of the church - the handout says "Ministry Partners" on it.

Amen.