

One Flock, One Shepherd

John 10:11-16

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Division isn't a new word, though it does seem to be trending lately, doesn't it?

Our nation is more ideologically divided now than perhaps at any time in any of our lives.

The Pew Research Center has been tracking the growing divide between right and left in our nation for decades now, and in a recent poll, they discovered that "both Republicans and Democrats express increasingly negative views... of those in the opposing party." That's not really news to anyone whose been paying attention. But here's the disconcerting part: opposing party members are now more eager to label one another as immoral, unpatriotic, lazy, unintelligent, and close-minded at higher rates than at anytime since Pew began tracking it.

In other words, there is an increasing number of people on both sides who think less and less of people on the opposing side – so much so that the Pew Research Center also reports that when it comes time to buy a home, Republicans have begun seeking out "Republican" neighborhoods and Democrats "Democrat" neighborhoods in which to live. We are now at a time in American history when we are intentionally seeking to to not have to live next to someone who voted differently than us. How long will it be until we are unwilling to live with one another at all? ("Political Polarization in the American Public," *Pew Research Center*, April 12, 2014)

And here's the irony of the whole thing: the same poll that reports how little we think of each other and how often we disparage one another also reports that "even as Republicans and Democrats have grown more critical of each other, they acknowledge – and voice concern about – the partisanship dividing the nation" ("Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," *Pew Research Center*, October 10, 2019).

In other words, we know that we are part of the problem, but we expect someone else to be the solution.

Historically speaking, Baptists aren't much better. We aren't exactly known for our ability to stay together. If there is a word or a phrase that is often associated with us, it might be the word "split." They've suffered another *split*. They are likely to *split* over that issue. How many times can that church *split*?

You've heard me use this analogy before, but it bears worth repeating today. When we think about the complexity of the Roman Catholic Church's decision-making process, that enormous church is like a battle ship in the ocean. It takes a mile to make it turn.

But we Baptists operate only at the local level. Our polity – meaning the way in which we are organized and make decisions as a congregation – is quick and can turn on a dime. It's meant to. That's intentional. It's not like a battleship, but like a school of fish – nimble and swift. If the spirit leads, this body of believers can change direction almost instantly to meet that call.

But being as nimble as a school of fish has a downside. If we get spooked, we can scatter like a school of fish, too.

You don't have to look too hard to find evidence of this tendency, either. Just google "list of Baptist denominations in North America."

If you do that, but for Mennonites, you will discover that there are 18 distinct Mennonite denominations in North America. There are 23 distinct Methodist denominations, 28 distinct Presbyterian denominations, 38 distinct Lutheran denominations, and, surprisingly to me, only 33 distinct Pentecostal denominations. But there are a whopping *56 distinct Baptist denominations* in North America.

I mean, if we were playing a game of football, I might not mind having the high score. But this isn't football, and 56 isn't a number we ought to be proud of.

So, what's my point?

"There shall be *one* flock, *one* shepherd," says Jesus (John 10:16).

In the gospel of John, Jesus likes to say, "I am...":

- "I am the bread of life..." (6:35).
- "I am the light of the world..." (8:12).
- "I am the gate..." (10:9).
- "I am the true vine..." (15:1).
- "I am the resurrection and the life..." (11:25).
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life..." (14:6).

In no other Gospel does Jesus ever use these "I am" statements – only in John. It doesn't take much imagination to hear in them what Moses learned about God at the burning bush.

"Who shall I say sent me?" Moses asked the voice coming from the bush.

"I AM WHO I AM," says God. "You shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

In John, Jesus says, "I AM" as way of saying "I AM has sent me to you." In our passage this morning, he says, "I AM *the good shepherd*" (10:11,14).

There are lots of ways we can go with this imagery.

We could talk about the historically unsavory character of shepherds — how they were poor laborers who were known for smelling like the animals they kept and were considered lowly and despised. Yet here, Jesus identifies in a positive light with those shepherds who live on the margins of society — a model for us of God’s care for the outcast and forgotten.

We could talk about how if Jesus is the good shepherd, then we are the sheep — the dull, mindless, blindly-following-whoever-leads-us sheep. It’s not a particularly flattering image, is it?

We could talk about the contrast of the good shepherd to the hired hand. The hired hand abandons his or her post at the first sign of trouble. The pay is too little to be worth their life. I mean, which of us would stand toe-to-toe against a wolf for the sake of a minimum wage paycheck? They don’t own the sheep. They have no emotional tie to the sheep. They’re in it for their own benefit alone.

But the good shepherd is different. The good shepherd faces the dangers that might otherwise scatter the flock. The good shepherd would even lay down his life for the sake of the flock. The good shepherd knows his own, and his own know him. He couldn’t abandon them anymore than the Father could abandon the Son.

You have to understand: John’s gospel is always at work at two levels. There is the level of appearances and the level of God’s deep reality.

In this passage, Jesus is in the midst of division — a division so deep that it will get him killed. He had just healed a man born blind, and is now confronting the religious leaders who have taken offense at him for pointing out their inability to see beyond that first level — the level of appearances.

He’s trying to tell them that God is at work in a way that they cannot see. God is up to something deeper than answering questions about who gets to be healed and why. God is trying to redeem the world — and no mere hired hand can get that job done. It’s going to take more than that. It’s going to take the work of the Good Shepherd — who would lay down his life for his sheep.

You see, in John’s Gospel, *God* is the one who must do the heavy lifting. It’s not about us or about what we can do. It’s about God and how, through the Good Shepherd, God does for us precisely what we *cannot* do for ourselves.

Only the work of God through Jesus is big enough to get the job done.

It was several years ago now, and it was still early into my internship at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. I was still in seminary, still studying to receive my Masters of Divinity degree, and still learning the ropes at this new job.

I'd been there long enough at this point to know most people by their first name, but not yet know last names or (the real test for new pastors) who was related to whom. Neither did I yet know people's individual personal beliefs, but I had come to the understanding that we were a rather mixed congregation — particularly as it related to our theological and political beliefs. Sound familiar?

On Sunday mornings, I'd take my station at the back of this big square sanctuary where I could keep an eye on everything and be ready to respond should a guest come in late or an issue arise that needed troubleshooting. Back there in that corner, behind everyone else and out of view, I sort of felt like the stage manager of a play — back stage directing traffic, solving problems, and making sure no one missed their cues.

On this particular Sunday, everything was humming along beautifully. The first part of the service went off without a hitch. The Christ candle lit without a fight. The choir sang its anthem beautifully. The lay leader stepped up to the podium right on cue and read our scripture for the day. But then, silence...

"Where was Sterling?" I thought. "He should have started preaching right after the scripture was read." The silence made me look up. He wasn't on the stage, so I scanned the congregation. He wasn't out among the people. Where was he?

That's when I spotted him. He was up at the front behind the piano. And he was pulling the American flag that was kept over there out of its stand. I watched, first in curiosity and then in disbelief, as he marched up the steps of the stage, took center stage just to the side of the pulpit, and seemed to plant the flag in the ground.

You could feel air suck out of the room.

Then, for what was probably just a few seconds but seemed like an eternity, he just looked out at us with the flag draped out over the edge of the stage... just scanning the congregation... in silence.

Then he said, "There are some of us in this congregation who believe that this flag has absolutely no place in a sanctuary intended for the worship of God, who created *all* people and who is worshipped by people from *all* nations. Those of us in this family of faith who feel this way believe that too often this flag becomes an idol that makes us forget that God's kingdom knows no boundaries."

He went on: "*And there are equally faithful Christians in this room who cannot imagine worshipping God in our sanctuary without this flag because it serves as an ever present reminder of the freedom with which we have been blessed to worship God — a freedom that so many in our world may never know.*"

He paused and scanned the sanctuary again, taking in the faces of those sitting in its pews, knowing them as their pastor, as one who knew each of them by name. And he said, "Despite those differences, they are your sisters and brothers *in Christ*. Because what Christ has done is bigger than what you or I believe."

Friends, only one thing is big enough to shepherd this flock.

The Republican party is not big enough to shepherd us. The Democratic party is not big enough to shepherd us. The American flag is not even big enough.

Only one thing is big enough to gather us into one flock and to keep us from being scattered, separated, *divided*: Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd — who knows each of us by name, knows what we say about those who don't vote like us, knows who we want as neighbors and who we don't, knows what types of Christians make us uncomfortable.

And yet the Good Shepherd has put you here in this flock, probably with all the kinds of people you'd rather not be around — because what God is up to through this flock is bigger than party politics or neighborhood HOAs; it's bigger than whether there's a flag in the sanctuary or not; it's bigger than our preferences; it's bigger than our beliefs; it's bigger than you and me.

But to see it we have to look past the superficial level of appearances, because it can only be seen from the level of God's deep reality.

"So," says Jesus, "there will be *one* flock, *one* shepherd."

Amen.