

The State of the Pasture
Fourth Sunday of Easter/Earth Day Sunday
April 22, 2018
Beth Carroll

Text: John 10:11-18

Let us wonder about those other sheep. The ones outside the flock.

There are many meaningful benefits that I experience in my work as a pastor here. One of them is getting to meet with young adults for coffee and hear about their lives, passions, and struggles. This past week, I met up with a young woman, I'll call her Sarah, a sophomore at Hope College, who shared with me how difficult her first year of college was. Sara encountered two types of students, those who are staunchly religious to the point that they want to talk about nothing else and those wanting nothing to do with faith. "where are those who are in between?", she lamented. "I don't fit". She struggled to find community to the point of nearly dropping out at the end of her Freshman year. What flock does this sheep belong to?

Then there is Melissa, who I meet with on occasion, who is too traumatized to step into a church. As a bi-sexual woman growing up in her parents' conservative congregation, she felt condemned and unloved by those who reduced her to a behavior or a label. What flock does she belong to?

A couple weeks ago when Pastors Jill, Gordon and I met to offer pastoral care to several young, vibrant and passionate LGBTQ people in our community who have come to see a need for being more vocal about injustice, Pastor Jill asked "who cares for you? Activism is draining work." The room fell silent. After a moment of quiet reflection, one of the women, aged 20, responded with "No one is caring for me. My parents have shunned me, my roommate doesn't understand me, and once I started speaking up for the injustices I have seen and experienced around me, many people started avoiding me. I have only one person in my life who I call friend."

What flock do these young people belong to?

My friend Gary is a twenty-year-old from Orange City, Iowa. He made it two years at Northwestern College before dropping out this year. “You have no idea how hard it is to be gay in my town,” he shared. “Its just so exhausting to continually justify my existence to Christians here”. Later that day on Facebook, Gary posted a quarter page newspaper announcement a group of pastors from Orange City purchased for the local paper. On one side it listed the pastors who were fervently against LGBTQIA people. On the other side, was a list of local pastors who had not yet taken a stand either way. The ad was an attempt to publicly guilt the undecided pastors into speaking out against this marginalized group in the community. It even misappropriated a quote by Martin Luther King Jr., “A man dies when he refuses to stand up for what is right.” Truer words were never spoken, despite being taken out of context. What flock does Gary belong to?

There are some days when I feel like there are more sheep outside the flock than in. Perhaps you feel this way when you speak with people too.

Or maybe YOU feel like you’re outside the flock, here in Holland, MI. Not unlike my Hope College friend Sarah, you feel that there are two extremes of people, those on the left and those on the right and you prefer the middle. But in a society that seems to devalue being politically ambidextrous, you feel pressure to pick sides. Or maybe you feel too old, too young, too Dutch, not Dutch enough, too messed up, too unintelligent, too shy, too loud, or just “too much” to experience community. I know the first 5 years I lived in Holland, I had zero count them ZERO friends. Many of us here are friendly, but many are not as welcoming as we could be.

So what are a bunch of us exiled sheep supposed to do?

First, I want to affirm to every one of you sitting in this sanctuary today that you belong HERE. Belonging at Hope Church is not contingent on whether you morally or spiritually measure up to some standard. Belonging has nothing to do with how many committees you join or how many hours you volunteer, although we can always use some more help prepping newsletters for the mail. Belonging has nothing to do with your skin color, gender identity, orientation, how nice your clothes are, whether or not you have straight hair, or whether or not you have spiritual doubts. You belong at Hope Church because you are in Christ. Or as 2 Corinthians says “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation! God has

reconciled us to God through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” The ministry of reconciliation we’ve been given is our charge to love other sheep both outside the church and those sitting next to you in the pew. We are all in this together. As 1 Corinthians says, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” By the very nature of our baptism, we are bonded together. We went from being lone sheep to a fold. We are the church, both in these walls and with the universal church, because of God’s spirit and even if we don’t get along.

Just a few minutes ago, we officially welcomed Sarah, Rick, Andrew, Anne, Liam, Stella, Rich, Mari, Samantha, Vivian, Rebecca, Steve & Ruth and affirmed our commitment to them saying these words:

we promise to love, encourage, and support them by teaching the gospel of God’s love, by being an example of Christian faith and character, and by giving the strong support of God’s family in fellowship, prayer, and service.

Our promise to God is to be the gospel to those here in midst. I challenge you to ask God even daily for simple ways to offer encouragement or love to these new members and to everyone else sitting around you. You will be surprised how creatively God will answer these prayers. This is our act of love and belonging that we receive and commit to giving to each other. Friends, you belong here.

A great hope for exiled sheep is knowing WHOSE we are. Our gospel today tells us we belong to a Good shepherd. When studying this passage today, I was reminded of the first part of the Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 1:

“Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

What even is a Good Shepherd? This is not Good as in the opposite of bad. This isn’t a shepherd who can be counted on simply to follow the rules closely during a monopoly game or sit still in church during a boring sermon. The Greek word used here is “Kalos”, which means the “model” shepherd. Kalos means “that

which is ordered, sound, noble, ideal, model, true, competent, faithful, and praiseworthy”. A kalos shepherd is one who will protect the sheep at all costs, fully knowing that this cost includes risking his own life, if it means the survival of the flock. This is not a shepherd who clocks in to do the bare minimum, taking 5 smoke breaks, and 90 minute lunches. This shepherd is “employee of the month” for 12 months running despite only being employed for 9 months. This shepherd is a lifer. This Shepherd spends so much time caring for us that he knows us better than we know ourselves. This shepherd is like a mother who knows the meaning behind every different cry of her infant. We belong to this shepherd not because of anything we’ve accomplished. Sheep don’t interview or audition for the role of cutest sheep. We belong to the Good Shepherd because Christ first loved us.

So if we belong, both to this church and to God, our good shepherd, how should we be? How should we behave? What is our response? Jesus instructs us several times throughout the gospels that the summation of our life as a flock is two summary commandments: Love God with our entire being, love on ourselves, and love on others with the same ferocity. Remember that promise we talked through earlier for how we are to commit to our new members and each other? Our response to being loved is to give ourselves to others around us, without forgetting those sheep who are without a flock. Our mission statement at Hope Church includes the following: “We seek to grow not only in numbers but, most importantly, in depth of Christian commitment. We seek to identify and engage each person’s particular gifts and to direct all our gifts in faithfulness to God’s Word.” It goes on to read “Hope Church is committed to service, both locally and worldwide, and we support the work of justice and compassion by all people of good will. We serve both as a congregation and individually through our daily living.” What else might we do with this when we hear the needs like the ones I opened with?

As we pray for God’s direction in how to love on those in our midst and those outside this pasture, we should expect that God will use our passions and our gifts. Do you enjoy cooking? Reach out to the office and be put on the list of potential cooks to assist those in need of meals when they are going through a medical emergency or family crisis. Are you good with money and financial planning? Maybe there are individuals or families in our midst who could use help with learning to budget and plan. Are you passionate about theological

questions and love deep discussion? Join us for Pub Theology on Wednesday nights. Yes, that was a shameless plug.

And speaking of shameless plugs, I want to talk to you about an opportunity that is near and dear to my heart, mentoring. When I was a teen and young adult, I know that I longed to have a person older than me to be a friend and sounding board for all of the questions I had in life. Sometimes they were simple like “Did you ever break down in hysterical sobbing, when your 2 year old went Jackson Pollack on the Living Room wall with your lipstick collection?” Sometimes my questions were bigger like “Is God actually a real man who died?” Or “Or is God actually a real man?” “Is God actually real?” Sadly, I never had a mentor like this when I was young, but I want to fight like mad to make sure younger people have this in their life.

This past Wednesday evening, writer Anna Redsand met with several of us here at Hope Church to talk about her spiritual memoir, “To Drink For The Silver Cup”. In her book, she describes her experience growing up with her Christian Reformed Church missionary family, while privately realizing she was gay even as a young child. Her stories of loneliness and exile from Christian community was heartbreaking. It took her 40 years to find a church home after she came out in her early twenties. When I had a few minutes to chat with her at the event, I asked her “what do you wish the adult Christians had given you when you were young?” She responded with “Its simple really. Just tell young people you love them without adding the word ‘but’ on the end.”

It is hard enough for youths to find connection with older adults who want to pour into them. I cannot imagine how difficult it is for LGBTQIA youth to find Christian adults to look up to. If stories like these break your heart like they do mine, I would encourage you to consider getting involved. I am always looking for people to assist with sponsoring our youth ministry, helping with one off trips or longer commitments, or even showing support by going to their sporting events and arts performances. And even more exciting, we are launching Generation Spark this fall which gives the opportunity for a more formal mentoring opportunity, where we will use a guided curriculum to walk with youth and young adults. I invite you to prayerfully consider being a part of this.

When Jesus reappears to the disciples after the resurrection later on in the book of John, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” and each time, when

Peter says yes, Jesus instructs “Then feed my sheep.” So Hope Church, I end with asking you the same. “Do you love Jesus? Feed his sheep.”.