

4th Week of Easter, Year B, April 22, 2018  
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio, TX  
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### Who are the other sheep?

I want to begin by telling you what this sermon is not about. In my younger days, when I reflected on this reading from John, I focused on how I am called to be a shepherd like Jesus. I thought that to follow Jesus I had to be a hero. I had to be willing to die. Without realizing it I made the reading about me and how important I was in the story. Following Jesus does not mean the same as "Being God". While there is some truth to the call to action to live out our faith, today this reading is presenting another challenge.

This sermon is also not about receiving comfort and getting MY needs met. It is tempting to focus on Jesus comforting ME. Jesus loved ME so much that he would leave the 99 sheep to take care of me. There is a time when grief is upon us and we need comfort and intimate time with Jesus in order to go on. But, this isn't the focus of the sermon today.

The call to focus on widening the circle and getting to know the other sheep is where this reading from John is taking me. Come along as I share some of what being a sheep among sheep is teaching me. The sheep are like spiritual windows through which we are encountering the Holy One.

While I was in Honduras recently, I wanted to visit folks and deliver a book with the readings of the year requested by the men in prison. I got to the front gate and there was a long line of people waiting to get in. I asked them what time it opened and a woman said 8:00. I said it is 8:20 now. Oh, she said it will open "ahorita" literally right now, but can mean anytime in the next few hours in actuality. (It is like, the other day in Texas can mean anytime in the past) For an impatient North American, "ahorita" can seem like an eternity of waiting.

New rules were being implemented to make prisons more like the US. Many can no longer see their loved ones because of costly background check requirements and people being transferred to far away rural areas. The people who are "deprived of their freedom", really miss visits from family and from people of the parish who used to come. The prison is overcrowded with people stacked in bunks, 4 beds high. All these changes are causing a serious problem with morale for those who are in prison.

I used my "white nun privilege card" to bypass the rules. I went to the guard and said I was with the sisters and I had books to be delivered. If I was truly living today's scripture, I may have stayed with those waiting outside and listened to their stories as we waited. But, that is a challenge for another day.

Vicky, one of the women in prison, told me what a great day Christmas was. They usually have lockdown at 5:30 every day, but no one came and it was 6:00. Then she saw why. The Sisters and the Associates came to sing Christmas music. She said it was beautiful and so moving to be remembered on Christmas. She was not a churchgoer, but a month after Christmas, that gesture was the first thing she talked to me about. The Sisters had told me that singing at the prison was the highlight of their day as well.

Another day we attended a communion service led by the people in prison with Sr. Pat preaching. She invited each person to share who Jesus is for them. Many spoke about Jesus as the one who forgives sins, as well as the light and the living water. I was challenged by their awareness of sin and Jesus as being the one to forgive them. I have plenty of examples in my life where I let grudges, anger, jealousy or frustration get the best of me, but I don't always think to approach Jesus to help me. **What can I learn about the other sheep along the way?** Am I aware of how Jesus forgives sins and my own need for forgiveness like these men who come and are church for each other while living in an overcrowded prison.

I have a neighbor who took in a relative who was recently released from prison. She wrote a letter to the whole neighborhood and invited folks to come and dialogue with her. She wanted the neighborhood to feel comfortable welcoming this new person. She said, "I was raised to believe that whatever your worst act in life is, it should not define who you have to be the rest of your life. I was raised in a family of second chances. I have done things in my life that I am not particularly proud of and I was fortunate enough to be forgiven." I have heard that saying before, but it took on new meaning for me in this context about forgiving self and others. Can I forgive the worst thing that was ever done to me? Can I forgive myself for my worst act?

Recently I have been reading a book called, "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson. He is a lawyer who works with people who are on death row.

He says, "You can't understand the important things from a distance...You have to get close." Another way of saying take time to be with the other sheep.

Mr. Stevenson tells of meeting a woman at the courthouse. I will paraphrase her story in first person. "I come here to help people. This is a place full of pain." My sixteen year old grandson, whom I loved more than life, was murdered by some boys fifteen years ago. I did not feel any better when the boys who did it were found guilty. A year later, I found a way to carry on by coming to the courtroom. I watched judges throwing people away like they weren't even human. I saw a lot of pain and grief and violence. **I came to the court house to catch some of the stones people cast at each other.** At first I was just there for the families of the victims of crimes and then I saw that the families of those being accused were suffering just as much. I realized that not everyone follows the words of Jesus that the one without sin can cast the first stone. **The world needs people to catch the stones being cast.** I came to catch stones and let others lean on me. This woman knew how to immerse herself with the other sheep.

The invitation in each of these stories is to widen our circle and to find the stones that the builders have rejected and the sheep that have been cast aside. The invitation is to see the potential for a cornerstone and to welcome the other sheep. The invitation is to find room close to our hearts for those who have been left out. I am not suggesting that we all need to go to Honduras or work on death row in order to know who the other sheep are. It could be we are called to notice the person putting air in our tires, or the checker at the grocery store, the neighbor who parks across from my drive, a family member who has been estranged, or even the person who sits on the other side of church. All are opportunities to widen our circle. Take a moment and reflect on who God may be calling you to include in the circle.

Let us know the sheep and hold them carefully close to our hearts.

Let us know the stones that the builders rejected - knowing that they will become cornerstones. Let us hold them carefully close to our hearts.

“Like a shepherd you feed the flock and gather the lambs in your arms, holding them carefully close to your heart, leading them home. Leading us home.”

(refrain adapted from Like a Shepherd by Bob Dufford, SJ 1976 OCP)