





THE GOOD SHEPHERD & HIS SHEEP from JOHN 10



John 10:11-18
Year B

What does belonging feel like?

I grew up in Youngstown Ohio where our home had a huge lot full of towering maples and oaks. My father hung a tree swing from the limb of one giant green apple tree. I spent my childhood summers rolling in the grass with my dog, crushing dandelions, and burning little pieces of wood with a magnifying glass. Whenever I'm near hardwood trees, I get the feeling of home.

I meet with a group of clergywomen some Friday's via Zoom. We're all writers and we meet to check in and write together for an hour. This is the only group I feel comfortable meeting sans makeup, hair undone, dressed in sweats. I know that I can show up exactly as I am.

What does belonging feel like to you? Alternatively, what does it feel like when you don't belong? When I hear this question, I think of middle school, a time full of awkward growth spurts and social backstabbing. I didn't feel at home in my body, among my peers, or with any other human, for that matter.

Have you ever visited a worship service of another religion? Where all the rituals are different and you want to be respectful, but you don't know what's happening? You're not sure when to stand or sit or sing or pray?

Have you been in a space where you were a minority? Maybe you were the only White person, or the only Black or [Latine](#) person? Or have you been in a meeting where you were the only woman, man or non-binary person? How did that feel?

We can hear the message, "You belong here," but if a place feels foreign – if we don't sense anything familiar, if we don't feel as if we can act or speak as our honest, authentic selves, if we don't experience the desire to be known, understood, loved – then we won't feel or know that we belong.

Belonging is the theme I see curling to the top of John 10:11-18 like a smoke signal to today's lonely, fragmented society. In this passage, Jesus

claims his sheep as “his own.” He knows his sheep and they know him. Other sheep do not belong to this fold, but Jesus is seeking and shepherding them, too. He will speak to them in ways that feel familiar, that reassure them they, too, belong.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as **Good Shepherd Sunday** with John’s “Good Shepherd” set alongside Psalm 23. Psalm 23’s description of the Lord as our shepherd, who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters, is of great comfort. But there is a challenge here, as well. As Sarah S. Henrich writes in her *Feasting on the Word* commentary, our Good Shepherd is “good” in the sense that he is a “model” rather than being the opposite of “bad.” Jesus is the model for making people feel like they belong. But what about us sheep?

I’m sure we can agree that we want God’s people – no matter who they are – to walk through the doors of Christ’s church and say, “This place feels like home.” But belonging is difficult to foster. True belonging is different than creating a space or a community that is “welcoming.” To welcome someone, to invite them into our home, is a beautiful gesture of hospitality. But it does just mean making space for them in what we consider “our” house.

That possessiveness hinders belonging. Once we feel like a church, an institution, a land or a country is “ours” — we’re happy to “welcome” others, but not as happy to give them a share of the ownership or let them shape the space according to their ideas, values or culture. Fostering a sense of belonging means giving up some of our control, allowing ourselves to be guests instead of hosts in a space that feels like ours.

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In *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about what she learned from a friend who grew up on a Midwest sheep farm. This friend dispelled the ugly rumor that sheep are dumb — a rumor spread by cattle ranchers because sheep do not behave like cows. “Cows are herded from the rear,” Brown writes, “by hooting cowboys with cracking whips.” This doesn’t work with sheep. “Stand behind [the sheep] making loud noises and all they will

do is run behind you because they prefer to be led. You *push* cows, but you *lead* sheep, and they will not go anywhere someone else does not go first — namely, their shepherd.”

Sometimes, those of us who claim Christ’s church as our home forget we are not the leaders, we are not the host, and we certainly do not “own” the space. We are the sheep being led by the Shepherd, a shepherd to whom we all belong. This is good news, and a challenging call. But when we get it right, we know, because we feel it: that sense of belonging in which we, too, are part of the fold.

Questions for reflection

1. What thoughts, ideas, feelings or images come to your mind when you consider Jesus as our “Good Shepherd”?
2. Where do you feel like you belong? What or who makes you feel this way?
3. What might need to change about your church or your community to make others feel like they belong?