

Belonging

You know how teenagers are. Maybe you've raised one or more teenagers. Once, you *were* a teenager. Did you want to fit in? Did you want to be just like your friends? Just like your contemporaries who seemed to be so cool? Did you want to belong? When angling with your parents for a particular privilege, did you rely on that timeless and well-worn plea: "But Mom, Dad, *everybody's* doing it"? If so, your parents might have looked at you patiently—wearily—while replying: "If *everybody* jumped off a cliff, would you do it, too?"

You know, sometimes we human creatures behave a lot like sheep. Sheep have been known to follow one another off a cliff. Sheep tend to follow the crowd. And so sometimes sheep meander aimlessly through life without purpose or direction. Sometimes sheep wander off to try and satisfy their hungers and thirsts in all the wrong places. Sometimes sheep go astray and head toward danger or disaster. Sometimes sheep need to be rescued from themselves.

Sound like anybody you know? Sheep without a shepherd often don't fare too well.

Did you notice that all of today's Scriptures have to do with sheep and their Shepherd? The beloved twenty-third psalm is our psalm of the day for this Good Shepherd Sunday. In the Revelation to John, we hear of the Lamb on the throne, the Lamb who himself shepherds his own to life-giving water. And in today's Gospel reading, Jesus, the Shepherd Christ, teaches about what it means to be a part of his flock. Jesus teaches about what it means to *belong*. That's what I want to reflect on with you during our time together this morning.

Even though [most of us aren't] [we're not] teenagers anymore, we still have, deep within us, a yearning to belong. A few years ago, a chain of neighborhood restaurants—which, of course, wanted your business—came up with a catchy slogan: *You belong at Applebee's*. Which meant: *you should be here. You ought to be here. You're supposed to be here*. But the word *belong* means more than that. When you *belong*, you're enveloped in the welcoming, convivial company of friends both new and old. You're no longer alone, no longer isolated. No

longer on the outside looking in. But, rather, a valued insider. Everybody knows your name. You *belong*!

And that's just how it is when you become part of the Shepherd's flock. You *should* be in the flock. You're *supposed* to be in the flock. But *belong* has a deeper meaning. You're an indispensable component. An essential member. Without you, the flock would not be complete. You're an integral part of the fellowship. You belong!

At your baptism, you were enfolded into the flock. You were and you are invited and included. You were and you are accepted and loved. The Shepherd ensured that you belonged, even before you believed. In our Wesleyan tradition, that's called prevenient grace—grace that's poured out *before* any response that you and I can make.

The Shepherd has led you and me to the waters of baptism, to life-giving waters. You are the sheep of his pasture. You are the Shepherd's sheep.

And the Shepherd says that sheep who belong to him hear his voice. But in this day and time, that's not always so easy to do. There are plenty of other voices competing for your attention—loud voices that can drown out the voice of the Shepherd.

Listening and really hearing requires a measure of intentionality. Hearing the Shepherd's voice means setting aside time and space to listen for it. And cultivating an awareness of the myriad ways in which the Shepherd's voice comes to you.

You hear the Shepherd's voice in an encounter with another whose path was intended to cross with yours. You hear the Shepherd's voice in your heart, in the peace and in the intimacy of prayer. You hear the Shepherd's voice through music that touches and lifts your spirit, music played and sung here, in this place. You hear the Shepherd's voice in the words of sacred Scripture—in the words that guide your steps, in the words that light your way, in the words that reveal the Shepherd as the One through whom all things have come into being.

You hear the Shepherd's voice in all his works. In the amazing beauty and diversity of the created order. *Through rocks and trees, through skies and seas...he speaks to [us] everywhere.*

I know a place with an overarching canopy of rhododendron and hemlock. A place where birdsong fills the air and a mountain brook burbles its way along its rocky bed. In all of these, I hear the voice of the One who speaks through his good creation.

On this Sunday before Earth Day, we pause to remember that God has charged us with stewardship of this fragile planet. We are charged with valuing and conserving its resources and its creaturely life, not only because they are useful to human beings, but because they are God's handiwork. We are charged with being proactive in our care of the earth; not only to refrain from polluting its air and water, but also to go green, to recycle, to reduce the size of our carbon footprint. To take only what is needed. To do all in our power to prevent thousands of species of living creatures from becoming extinct, from becoming virtually unknown to future generations. For we don't inherit the earth from our parents; we borrow it from our children. And their children. And their children's children. We have a responsibility to them. And we are accountable to the Shepherd.

For you and I belong to the Shepherd. You hear his voice—calling you. The Shepherd calls you because he knows you. Knows you personally. Just as some earthly shepherds have a name for each individual sheep—like Blackie, or Long-Ears—so too, this Shepherd knows *your* name. Knows what makes you stand out. Knows what makes you special. Knows what makes you unique. Knows what makes you *you*. This Shepherd knew

you even before you were knit together in your mother's womb. This Shepherd knows all about you. Knows when you're tempted, when you're anxious, when you're weary. Knows when you're lonely, when you're hurting, when you're grieving. Knows when you're laughing and joking. And when you're serious.

The Shepherd also knows that because you belong to him, you have made a commitment to follow him. Following the Shepherd is so much more than a single moment of conversion, of accepting him as your personal Savior. Following the Shepherd is not only asking: *What would the Shepherd do?* Following the Shepherd means asking: *What does the Shepherd want me to do?* What is the Shepherd's will for my life? It means asking this question not just once, but again and again. Turning your very self—your whole being—over to the Shepherd. And following him *wherever* he leads. Following him in the way you live your life. *All through* this life.

There's one lifelong follower of the Shepherd that I'd like to tell you about. Her name is Olivia. She lives in another part of the state. Olivia's father was an abusive alcoholic. But instead of rejecting him or retaliating against him in some way, she forgave

him. And took care of him during his final illness. Olivia married a good Christian man. Together, they raised four children and planted seeds of faith in them and in their grandchildren. Olivia is part of the glue that's held our home church together through the years. She has a quiet, gentle spirit. I have never heard her speak ill of anyone. And I have never known a more loving person. Olivia lives in obedience to the One who commanded: *Love one another as I have loved you.* Truly, she is an inspiration! Olivia is widowed now, and may herself be nearing the end of this life. But she's still following the Shepherd.

For she belongs—and so do you—to the One who gives the gift of life eternal. You have his own promise—made earlier in this same Gospel of John—that everyone who believes will not perish, but will have everlasting life in this One who has defeated death and so can promise life. Life that begins not on a far-off, distant someday, but *now*. Today! Life without end, abundant life to be lived fully and joyfully and gratefully and faithfully. You believe. You belong to the Shepherd.

And no one can take you out of the Shepherd's flock. You're in it to stay! Nobody and nothing can separate you. No power or principality can steal you away. No evil force in this

world—no matter how seductive and alluring—can snatch you out of the hand of the Shepherd whose power is far greater than the power of evil. The Shepherd who holds you and keeps you in his tender care. The Shepherd who is with you even as the shadows close around you, even as you walk through the darkest valley. The Shepherd who will never let you go. The Shepherd who will never leave you.

The Shepherd who provides and guides you to green pastures. The Shepherd who protects and comforts you with rod and staff.

The Shepherd who watches over you. Who knows you completely. Who lets you hear his voice and calls you to follow him. Who is the Giver of life. Christ Jesus is this Good Shepherd in whom you live, with whom you will dwell in loving relationship all the days of your life. Always and forever! You are his. You belong to him. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.