

“God’s Global Business”
John 10:11-18

In the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2001) David Barrett identifies 10,000 distinct religions, 150 of which have a million or more followers. Even in our own faith, the Christian faith, there are as many as 30,000 faith structures. Where is God in all of this diversity? Is God in one of those more than the other? Is the knowledge of God limited to one race, religion or culture? What about those who confess no faith at all? How do we respond? This is especially an important question for us as Americans because we live in the most religiously diverse country in the whole world. This is according to Diana Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard. And many of us change religious affiliation at least once in our lifetime. We live in a country where belonging to a certain faith group is not something that people follow along family lines. Most Americans feel a sense of freedom in choosing whatever faith they would like to practice. According to a recent article in the Democrat and Chronicle, the Rochester newspaper, people change faiths early and often. The article says, “The U.S. is a nation of religious drifters, with about half of adults restlessly switching faith affiliation at least once during their lives.” This article is based on a recent report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life. But many of our choices don’t guarantee us that we will find the one true church, mosque, temple, or synagogue. Even though some churches or religious groups claim to have the only truth and the only right belief system, there is no true way of knowing or proving that. In fact, most people that I know who try to find the “right” religion, often find themselves ending up with more frustration or questions.

So, how do we respond? I find that our Bible story for today to be a great help for us. The reading from John 10:11-18 talks about the importance of our connection to the shepherd as the basis for faith. The Gospel of John was written towards the end of the first century, about 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. By that time, the followers of Jesus had already been rejected by the religious leaders of Jerusalem. The followers of Jesus at the time were beginning to emerge as a separate religion which they made struggle with the meaning of all of these events and God can love them and the Jews at the same time. So, the words of John 10 show that Jesus being the revelation of divine wisdom and presence, the believers can focus on loving and knowing that the presence of God, the shepherd was the center of faith and not a set of beliefs, doctrines or religious practices. The shocking, unconditional love that the shepherd provides is what makes a community part of the fold. This love reverses and resists our human tendencies for oppression and exclusion.

In verse 14, we note that Jesus said, “I know my own and my own know me.” In the Bible when the word “know” is used it indicates deep connection and love. Mutual knowledge between the shepherd and the people is the key to liberation. Love is what brings us life, not fear or rules. Our relationship with God is what makes the difference. Our religious affiliations and practices only hold a container for us to be intimate with God. Religion as a set of beliefs and practices is only a pointer to help us on this inner journey of deep connection. Whether we have 10,000 religions or one religion, the key to our faith is knowing God intimately. This knowledge frees us to love and to serve. It frees us from spending our energy in life on figuring out the best religion to follow. We are regularly reminded of the way Jesus was, as writer Barbara Essex of the Pacific School of Religion observes: “Jesus did not exclude people based on the standards of the day....He embraced the outcast, the oppressed, and the overlooked....John makes it clear that the work of gathering the flock belongs to Jesus and God—we are to provide a space where all are welcome. The community that John envisions is open and celebrates its diversity as a gift from God.”

The other important aspect of this is to remember that God's love is not limited by any culture, race, or religion. The Gospel reading begins (John 10:11) with the Greek phrase, *ego eimi* (I am), which was used as a formula of self-revelation both of God (in the Septuagint) and of Hellenistic deities. It is an interesting choice of metaphor for Jesus. We tend to think of the shepherd in romantic ways based on our Sunday School images of art we have seen of Jesus and the little sheep. But the life of the shepherd in the time of Jesus was far from being peaceful. It was a profession that involved danger, hard work and a low social status. There were also bad images of shepherds in the Bible, one of which is found in Ezekiel 34 referring to the religious leadership as bad shepherds. They often controlled and exploited the people they were trusted to care for. One of the main things that entrapped the people of Israel was their exclusive focus on themselves. They often saw that God's love was for them and for them only. They were chosen so that others may learn more about God's love, yet they often forgot that piece of their walk with God. In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith," she reflects on "encountering others" as a spiritual practice, and then she expands our understanding of hospitality: "In biblical tradition, the practice of encounter shows up most often as the practice of hospitality, or *philoxenia*. Take the word apart and you get *philo*, from one of the four Greek words for love, and *xenia*, for stranger. Love of stranger, in other words, which is about as counterintuitive as you can get. For most of us, xenophobia-fear of stranger-comes much more naturally, but in that case scripture is unnatural. According to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, 'the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to "love the stranger."'"

In verse 16, Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold," reminding us that the love of God is not limited to one group. There are others who are invited into the fold and that is the work of the good shepherd and ultimately our work. If we are the followers and companions of the good shepherd, we are invited to love and care for God's sheep which is the whole creation with all of its people and all of its creatures.

Instead of being consumed by finding the right religion or church, the good shepherd is inviting us to a relationship of love and connection that embraces our personal idiosyncrasies, preferences, theologies, cultures, races and even differences. We can see through all of our experiences that we are connected through the love and Spirit of God in and among us. This kind of vision challenges us to see the global nature of God's business and to participate in it. This kind of call to know the good shepherd intimately can lead us into uncomfortable and even dangerous places. The good shepherd we follow has been willing to lay his life for those whom he loved. I know that this is the Spirit that has led Rev. Prechard to leave his home to be with us so that we can have a closer connection to his people. Archbishop Romero who was a champion of the poor and prophet of peace and justice in El Salvador and who died for his faith in Christ as he was assassinated in 1980, once said, "A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what gospel is that?" If we only love the people who love us or with whom we are comfortable, how can we claim that faith has made any difference in our lives?

In his book *God laughs and Plays*, David Duncan tells the story of a nurse who knew the power of deep connection of how God's love embraces all languages, races and religions. This was about a nurse who responded to the call of love and service by going to Iraq with a medical group. This was during the time when there was a major health crisis for children after the first Gulf War when the water treatment plants were destroyed and the sanctions on Iraq created a haven for death and disease for hundreds of thousands for Iraqi children. The nurse's name

was Gerri Haynes. She is the head of a group called Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility who have helped Iraqis with health concerns after the first Gulf War. In May of 2002, Gerri went on another trip to Iraq. But before the trip, her oldest daughter tried to persuade her to stay home. But Gerri was not going to stop. So, her daughter told her, "If you go, just be completely present, wherever you go." These words returned to Gerri while she was in Iraq in an Iraqi hospital virtually bereft of medicine and hope. While her group moved from bed to bed, Gerri approached a woman sitting next to her dying child. Gerri speaks no Arabic. The woman spoke no English. Try to be "present" anyway, Gerri looked at the child, then at the mother, and placed her right hand over her own heart. The Iraqi mother placed her right hand over her own heart. Gerri's eyes and the mother's eyes simultaneously filled with tears. The hospital was crowded. Gerri's visitation time was short. She started to move to the next bed, but then remembered her daughter's words: "completely present." She and the mother were already crying, their hands over their hearts. There was nothing Gerri could do, despite her medical training, for the child. "How much more present," she wondered, "is it possible to be?" She stepped forward anyway. With no plan but vague allegiance to the commandment, the nurse without medicine stepped toward the bed of the dying child and inconsolable mother. She then put both of her hands out, palms up. The Iraqi mother fell into her arms."

May God always be our shepherd to lead us on the path of love and deep connection with others so that we may know the good shepherd and join his mission of love with all people to live in harmony, justice, and peace. Amen.