

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter: John 10:1-10

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When I first got to seminary, I felt like a nerdy kid in a book-laden candy store. The campus of the University of the South at Sewanee is a fantasy world. It sits perched on the southern tip of the Cumberland Plateau with a view from Tennessee all the way near to Houston. It's high enough, and the elevation change so fast, that you can drive around campus in the fog, then head down the mountain, and emerge into a rainstorm: what you thought was fog was someone else's cloud. It's magical. Walking around the place, you forget you're in the American South. You imagine Ron Weasley stumbling out of potions class while you stroll between old stone buildings. The carillon chimes out Anglican hymns and sometimes the Mario theme song. A garth holds hidden cherry blossoms, the chapel's roof scratches Heaven's belly, and students make their way to and from class with long, black robes billowing in the breeze. There's even twin staircases that lead to parapets, and the two narrow stairs are labeled in stone with the words "Up" and "Down" so as to avoid pedestrian collisions. With all the whimsy a place like that deserves, those in the know know better than to obey the words carved at their feet. The Down staircase is for ascending and the Up is for descending.

But the library's where we're headed on our campus tour today. The library serves both the undergraduates and the seminarians, and it's a bookworm's dream. The basement has those really cool, kinda scary accordion shelves, the kind that shift over so you can squeeze down one aisle of books hoping no one else wants to squeeze you out. The first and second stories host most of what the undergrads'll need, but, and I can't stress this enough, those two floors hold magics of their own well worth exploring. The seminary library perches on top, overseeing the campus and all who wander its green paths. This was the first place that I experienced a study carrel, the first place I carried stacks of books so high my chin had to chip in, the first place I realized just how unbelievably intelligent some folks can be.

The seminary librarian was just that type. Jim Dunkly was a big fella, built kinda like Yogi Bear but with jowls like Deputy Dog. If you needed help finding a book or couldn't even think of where to begin on a topic, he was the man to see. And that man, y'all, he was brilliant. The kind of brilliant that was both endearing and a little frustrating. One time, I don't even remember what I was working on, I went into his office and found him mostly obscured by piles of tomes and loose papers and three book trucks. I told him what I was working on and asked for recommendations. He nodded and said, "Great. How's your French." Nonexistent. "Not a problem. German?" Nope. "Latin?" No, Jim, no Latin. "Ok, so just English then?" The thing is, while it felt judgy, it wasn't. He was just narrowing down in his card catalog brain which shelves to take me to. And then he did, directly. He walked me straight to about twenty-five books that I just had to consult before writing my three-page essay.

The real treat, though, was when his list of must-reads included something from the rare book collection. Y'all. That locked cage held Sewanee's most treasured books, including an original 1549 Book of Common Prayer, complete with hand-written notes in the margins from some 16th Century student practicing their letters. Be still my nerdy heart. Some of the books had old chains dangling from their spines, some were in remarkably good condition, all smelled like time had set these pages aside just to remind 21st Century seminarians that tradition can be held in their hands. There was one book in there, not terribly old but pretty darn unique. It was beyond even Dunkly's linguistic prowess, which made it all the more impressive. It was a copy of the Bible translated into an indigenous language from the Andes.

There's a school of missionaries that take their approach a little differently from what you might imagine missionaries do. Instead of going into a far-flung place and preaching conversion and coercion, a small group meets with the community's leaders, gets permission to come in, and then sets to work. And their work consists

of learning the unwritten indigenous language intimately for as long as it takes. They work with the community, talk to everyone of every age, and learn the intricacies as best a foreigner can. And then, again working with the community, they create an alphabet. Once that's established, the missionaries provide a translation of the Bible in the brand-new alphabet specific to that community's language. The community then does whatever they want with the Bible and moves forward with a writing system that didn't exist before. Sometimes this leads to conversion, sometimes it doesn't. But what makes this all so fascinating is that sometimes words and concepts don't translate all that well, if at all. So the missionaries have to get creative. And that especially unique Bible in the rare book collection at Sewanee has one of those creative moments.

In this passage from John, Jesus weaves a confusing metaphor involving sheep and shepherds and gates and pens and robbers. The disciples don't get it, but they never really do. So, he'll explain what he's talking about, and ultimately lands on calling himself the Good Shepherd. Beautiful. Simple enough, right? As it turns out, not quite. That indigenous community in the Andes didn't keep sheep. In fact, they'd never seen sheep, never even heard of 'em. So, when it came time to translate this passage, the missionaries hit a conundrum. They could create a word for sheep and teach the people what it meant. But as solutions go, that wasn't great. For one thing, you'd have to explain a critter that didn't exist in their world, and if you've ever seen medieval European drawings of sub-Saharan animals based solely off of verbal descriptions, you can imagine the trouble. But also, it required having someone to explain what the critter was, which defeated the purpose of writing something the community could use without the missionaries around. And also also, it meant telling the story of Jesus in a way that felt foreign, settled in a place so distant that you couldn't even picture what their animals looked like. So the missionaries made a choice. Instead of Jesus shepherding a bunch of sheep, he became a shepherd of llamas. And the story clicked. It was local, it was real, and it was theirs. That's why a copy sits in the rare book collection at Dunkly's fingertips. Not because it's old but because it's brilliant. If you think about it, whether Jesus is talking about sheep or llamas or zebu or whatever not-too-bright livestock you've got, the meaning of this story's the same. Jesus is our shepherd, providing for our needs, laying us down in green pastures, reviving our souls.

You know, sometimes I wonder how differently these familiar stories sound to folks that hear them for the first time. I think most of us know these stories so well that we sometimes miss the wonder of them. It's hard for me to imagine what it means to hear this for the first time because the first time was so long ago. I guess I've been taking the Good Shepherd for granted. There's so much love that goes into this careful work. There's protection and care, nurturing, sometimes bottle feeding and wound tending. There's visits from the vet and running off coyotes -- or whatever predators wander your lands. There's a gentle hand and a caring heart and a deep gratitude for the animals themselves. And there's always the concern that something might happen to them in spite of all your best efforts. "I will lay my life down and lift it up again," Jesus says, the full extent of how far he's willing to go laid bare. There's so much wonder to that. That someone who's never met me's willing to come into my life and do all those things for me. What did I ever do to deserve that?

I don't think it was really until I was walking around Sewanee after a deep conversation with a priest, that I began to understand some of this. In addition to all the other wonders, Sewanee has an amazing cemetery. It drips with moss and hanging branches and the gravestones go back far enough to remember when this country split. I wandered around campus after that mind-blowing conversation and looked up to find myself strolling between graves, and something about the gravity of that place -- maybe the magic of it, too -- clicked. Here were a thousand departed souls, many of them on the wrong side of history, but faithful enough to land here with a cross marking their departure. Sheep that followed what they thought was right gathered in to this safe and quiet place alongside all these others, others who just as easily could've been enemies as friends. All held in the same sheepfold.

It's a rare thing these days, just as it was in the Andes and just as it was in Galilee, it's a rare thing to find a place where people can disagree and still come together. It's a rare thing, and it's a treasure. I pray we don't lose sight of the love that makes that all possible. And I pray that when we do, we'll never become desensitized to the reminder, to the wonder that is Christ the Good Shepherd. Be we sheep or llamas, brilliant minds or regular folk, in whimsical settings or slouched on the sofa, Jesus holds that gate open for us all.