

“Beyond Ourselves” // Beyond Sunday summer series
Wildwood Mennonite Church // Joe Heikman // Sept 1, 2019

*"I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me,
in the same way Abba God knows me and I know God—
and for these sheep I will lay down my life.
I have other sheep that don't belong to this fold—
I must lead them too, and they will hear my voice.
And then there will be one flock, one shepherd.
This is why Abba God loves me—
because I lay down my life, only to take it up again.
No one takes my life from me; I lay it down freely.
I have the power to lay it down,
and I have the power to take it up again.
This command I received from my Abba."*

~ John 10:14-18 (*The Inclusive Bible* translation)

The Good Shepherd passage from John 10 is one of the more well-known metaphors from the gospels. "I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

It's a comforting metaphor, connecting with the most favoured Psalm, "the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."



But for some reason, the Christianity of my childhood missed the point of the text. Maybe it's because we were mostly modern dairy cattle and pig farmers rather than ancient sheep herders, but I always assumed that the animals belonged inside the pen. I spent a large chunk of my childhood moving cows around from pen to pen and double and triple checking to make sure that the gates were securely fastened. You did NOT want to be the one to blame when the cows got out!



And so I assumed that this metaphor was all about boundaries, the gates and walls. That's what my Bible teachers emphasized, especially the part about Jesus being the gate, the only way into the pen. The others, anyone who didn't claim the name of Jesus, those

were the thieves and bandits Jesus warned against. That was what the walls were for, the rules and traditions of our religion, to protect us against the harsh world out there that wanted to harm us and lead us astray.

That's an oversimplification, of course, but I don't think it's an unfair one. That is a central principle of the Christianity that many of us were brought up in: the good sheep belong in the "pen" of the church, and we take comfort knowing that the Good Shepherd guards the door.

But that reading misses the key verses (John 10:3-5):

*The sheep know the shepherd's voice; the shepherd calls them by name, and **leads them out. Having led them all out of the fold, the shepherd walks in front of them and they follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice. They simply won't follow strangers--they'll flee from them because they don't recognize the voice of strangers.***"

Wait a second, the shepherd leads the sheep *out* of the pen? Where's the part where Jesus leads all the sheep back inside the pen and they sleep safe and sound the whole night through?

It's not there. The metaphor is all about getting away from the walls and the gates, going out into the world. Not without order, not without God, but definitely minus the protection of the walls and gates that looked so secure from the inside. The security system is simply the shepherd's presence, following the shepherd's voice. (This will NOT work with cows, by the way. I can't speak for its effectiveness with actual sheep.)



That's the metaphor, of Jesus leading his followers *away from* the familiarity and security of their religious tradition. Jesus was signaling the end of the Jewish religion as the way to God, tearing down the religious boundaries that defined his people for centuries.

That was his mission as the Good Shepherd, not to be a gatekeeper, not even to reform, but to lead people away from the corrals of religion. Because that's where life is, where God is, not on the inside, but everywhere.

So. This summer series we've been talking about "Beyond Sunday" - looking for God beyond the walls of the church. I began with what might have sounded like a lament. I pointed out that church involvement is a lot less important to Western folks like us than it used to be.

Even in a top-notch church like this one (ha!), attendance is less regular, it's harder to get

people together consistently for groups and events, and encouraging people to volunteer is more and more difficult.



This isn't a new trend; church leaders have been wringing their hands about this stuff for several decades. And it's almost always viewed negatively: "oh no, what are we going to do? People are leaving the church and they're not coming back! They're leaving the fold!"

But rather than panicking, there are some who are pointing out that it's interesting that people are leaving the fold, since that is where the Good Shepherd wanted us to be all along? Because abundant life isn't on the inside, God isn't inside, God is everywhere.

What if this "religious decline" is actually a movement of people learning anew to hear the voice of God beyond the church? Imagine, *"having led them all out of the fold, the shepherd walks in front of them and they follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice."*

And so, once again, that's what we've been up to this summer, trying to figure out ways to listen to the voice of the shepherd beyond the walls of our church and our religious traditions. (I don't know how well it's worked; I think statistically our attendance has been lower than usual this summer but in the upside-down world of the metaphor I'm not sure if that's a sign of success or failure? ;)

So we've listened for the voice of God "in the garden" and "on the farm," through the lens of photography, through backyard rituals and lake-side recreation, in the hard times of spiritual wilderness and even in prison, by way of our various storytellers. It's been a busy summer! God is everywhere that we have thought to look.

One thing that we have not specifically touched on yet is what brought me to this John 10 text in the first place. As Jesus is trying to explain this metaphor to his stubbornly bewildered followers, in the piece of the text that we read earlier, Jesus slides this line in: *"I have other sheep that don't belong to this fold--I must lead them, too, and they will hear my voice. And then there will be one flock, one shepherd."*

What about *them*? That's always been at the center of this image of the sheep fold. I'm on the inside, and there are other creatures out there, maybe sheep, maybe goats, maybe even wolves. If Jesus is leading us out of the fold, what will separate us from them? If we are moving away from the institutional church, what about all the non-Christians out there, the other religions and the non-religious? How do we interact with them--and shouldn't we be worried that their values are going to take over ours?



For that matter, what about the other types of Christians out there? Mennonites have always relished our "Anabaptist distinctives." If we de-emphasize our traditions and labels, what will keep us from becoming like those Baptists or Catholics down the street?

What about *them*? Big question at this particular moment in human history, but hardly the first time. In Jesus' time, the big division was between the Jews and the Gentiles, which is simply how the Jews referred to literally *everyone else*. That division was the biggest conflict among Jesus' followers--would they continue to practice the rules and rituals basic to Judaism, as Jesus himself appears to have done? Or would they open their communities to Gentiles who did not first convert to the Jewish religion?

That conflict is probably what Jesus' words about the "other sheep pens" refer to directly. And the writer of the Gospel of John, which was the last of the four gospels to take shape, seems to be making the case quite strongly that the path was open to everyone, Jew and Gentile, because Jesus' way wasn't a religion but the way of love.

So, when you see a Gentile, this text suggests, don't see a stranger, don't see a rival, don't see a threat. See someone who is also listening for the voice of the Shepherd in their own way, part of the same flock.

If God is everywhere, then God is also with *them*. If we're all created in God's image, then they are also image-bearers of the divine. And they can also speak to us in the voice of God, for God's voice is also resonating within them.

So then, how do we approach people of "other sheep pens" to hear God's voice?

Those criticisms may or may not be valid, but let's be honest about what their purpose: I'm building my own portable sheep pen, because I don't like being exposed to all the other sheep in God's pasture. My critiques aren't genuinely about being helpful or increasing dialogue and understanding--my critiques are walls to help keep me comfortable and at a safe distance.

But the call of the Good Shepherd is to trust, to step away from the walls, to set aside my criticisms and instead lean on the conviction that all people are made in the image of God, to trust the voice of the Shepherd wherever it is coming from.

One of my university professors offered this approach in an Introduction to World Religions class:

“In order to study someone else's beliefs, you don't have to believe what they believe. You simply have to believe that what they believe is believable.”

~ Dr. Joel Mlecko, Indiana University of Pennsylvania:

I may not agree, for example, with our Roman Catholic friends on the doctrine of *transubstantiation*. I can't see how the bread and wine of communion become the literal body and blood of Christ--it doesn't make a ton of sense to me how or why that would happen.

But I can see that it makes a certain kind of sense to Roman Catholics, that they're not absurd or mad for believing it. This is something that intelligent, functional human beings choose to believe--some of whom are indeed much more intelligent and functional than I am. I don't have to believe it or even agree that it is a positive thing, but I can imagine that if I were in their shoes I might believe as they do.

And so the question then is not “*how could they possibly believe something like that?*” but “*why do they believe that?*” How does that belief or practice function in their life and their community, what role does it play, what good does it do for them?

Or from the John 10 metaphor, what about this is the voice of the Good Shepherd that they are hearing and responding to? How is God present here?

That doesn't mean we're never critical of someone else's religion, but if we lead with that we'll never understand it. Criticism rarely develops into understanding. But understanding can give birth to the kind of meaningful relationships where mutual reflection and criticism can actually be effective for them and for me.

Some examples:



This summer my family spent a week up at Waskesiu. One of the perks of Prince Albert National Park is that they have daily kids activities, and one of those we went to was a demonstration of how to put up a tipi. A guide from Sturgeon Lake First Nation helped the kids set up a mini tipi in the way of the Plains Cree.

As she guided the kids through putting up the poles and tying them together, she explained that each pole represented one of the values of the community. The first three represented the gifts of the elders, the next three the gifts of the middle age, the next three the gifts of the children, and so on... Each piece had a specific meaning and a specific way of being put together.

At one point, one of the parents asked why the rope was always wound around the poles in a clockwise direction, which was one of the things that the guide kept emphasizing that it had to be clockwise. And she replied that that they always do things a certain way, because the way that we do things matters.

It matters because it matters? To my ears, that is a circular argument, one that sounds an awful lot like one of my least favourite church sayings, "well, that's how we've always done it." Worst reason to do something, ever!

That's arbitrary, legalistic even, and my spirit immediately pushes back against that--I value immediacy and relevance much more than tradition.

But that's not what she was saying. The opposite, actually. Her belief is that the way we do things matters, and so we take care to do things a certain way. There may or may not be value in tying the ropes in a clockwise direction, taken as an individual action. But it's not an individual action--there are no individual actions. Each thing we do impacts every other thing, and so we should do even the simplest thing with as much attention and care as we can.

In my experience, churches fall back on doing things "the way we've always done it" when the meaning for why we do those things has been lost. But what the guide was saying is that the Plains Cree people do things a certain way so that meaning *doesn't get* lost.

Ah. The value is the same, the way we do things, how we live, that matters. How I practice that is quite different than the Plains Cree. But by understanding and respecting their ways, I can hear the voice of my God in them.

Another example. A couple of years ago I took a week-long class at the Canadian School of Peacebuilding at CMU on peace in Islam and Christianity. The class was taught by Harry Huebner and Dr Ali Shomali.

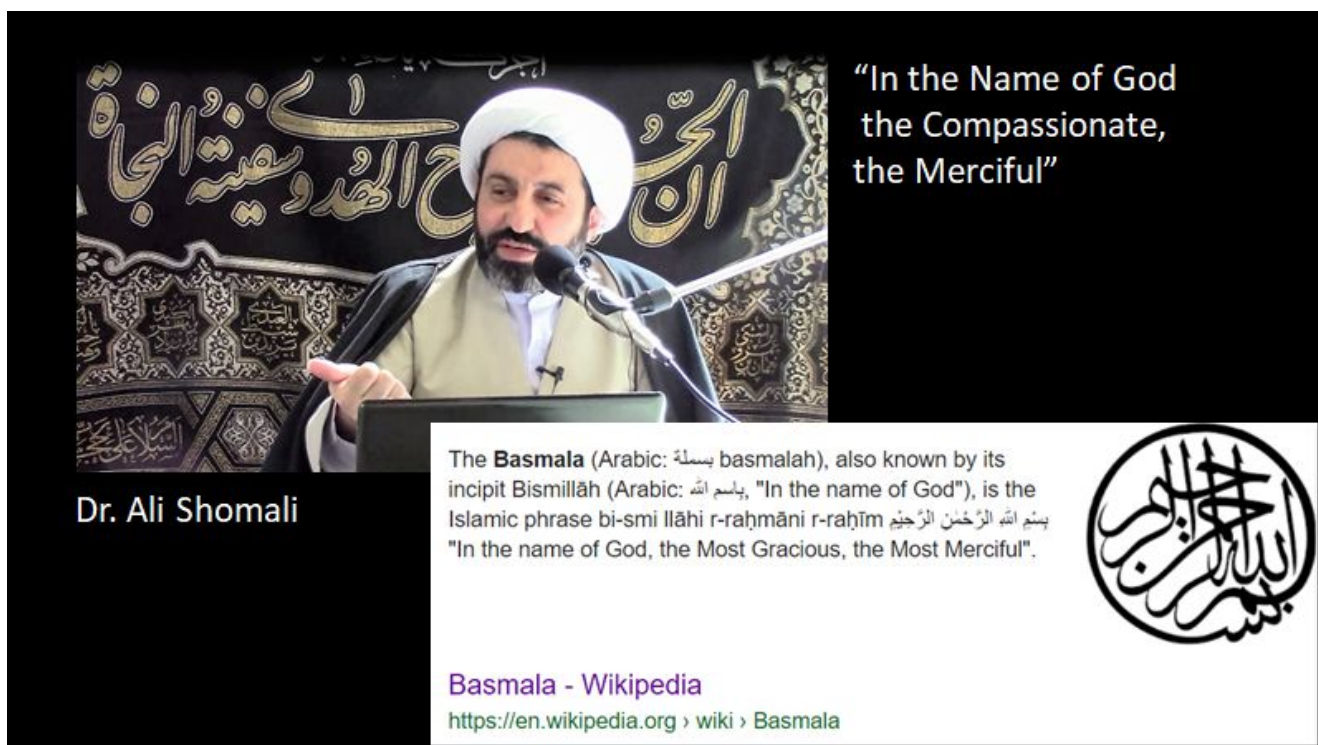
I was very impressed by Dr Shomali. He's a Shia Muslim, originally from Iran (ee-RON), now living in England and travelling the world mostly creating peace through interfaith dialogue.

Now, I've studied Islam a little bit, so I'd like to think that my understanding goes beyond the stereotypes we see in the media. But I have to say, I find it really hard to practice what I just preached about respecting other people's beliefs when it comes to Islam. I have a long list of critiques, fair or otherwise.

Mostly, I find the way Islam talks about God to be quite harsh. As you probably know, *Islam* means "submit" and the core of Islam is God's sovereignty--God is the absolute ruler and our role is to submit and shape our lives around God's commands. "Trust and Obey, for there's no other way," you might say. (Christianity has a great deal in common with Islam).

In my Christianity, I generally reject this image of God as demanding that we obey or get punished. I don't find that very loving.

And so I was a bit surprised when this professor of Islam began each of his lectures with the phrase, "*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*", which he would then translate into English: "In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful"



Dr. Ali Shomali

"In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful"

The **Basmala** (Arabic: بِسْمِلة basmalah), also known by its incipit Bismillāh (Arabic: بِاسْمِ الله, "In the name of God"), is the Islamic phrase bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm بِسْمِ الله الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful".

[Basmala - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basmala)
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Compassion and Mercy. That's who God is to me as well, but that's not what usually comes to mind when I think of the God of Islam. Strength, for sure, Wisdom and Judgment, yes. But compassion and mercy? I don't know about that.

But that's the way Dr. Shomali began every lecture. I did a bit of looking online after, and it's not just him, this is officially a thing. It's called the "Basmala" and it's the first line of every chapter of the Qur'an. According to Wikipedia, it's supposed to be used in everyday life for Muslims, they're supposed to use this as the prelude for every action, to do every thing that they do "in the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful."

I hadn't really heard of it before Dr. Shomali, and I suspect that in practice it's a bit like most Christians saying "grace" before we eat. We do it when we remember, but we don't always remember...

Anyway, perhaps because it was new to me, that constant reminder of God's Compassion and Mercy was at the forefront in everything I learned about Islam from Dr. Shomali. For him, all of the submitting, all of the rule-following, all of the daily prayers and the restrictions on food and clothing and relationships, all of that was grounded in God's Compassion and Mercy.

I still don't get it. I can't quite make the full connection between the value of submission and the God of Compassion and Mercy.

And yet, I find great meaning in that practice of constant grounding in God's love. I could benefit from more of that in my life. And I could definitely use more of that in my understanding of Muslims, to learn to see them as they see themselves.

That's how it works. We find what we're looking for. I'll think differently about the First Nations tipi because I spent time looking for the good in it as I prepared for today. I'll remember Dr Shomali's understanding of the Compassionate and Merciful God because I put in the effort to understand, even a little bit.

This is true also of our Christian brothers as sisters, too--we can often be especially critical of those who are most like us, who share the same identity. Here as well, instead of leading with our criticisms, can we approach those relationships with eyes and ears open listening for God's voice even among those with whom we disagree? We find what we are looking for.

I'll close by pointing back to John chapter 10. The defining characteristic of the Good Shepherd, the thing that makes Jesus different than all the others who came before, is his attitude of self-sacrifice. The thing that makes him Good is that he lays down his life for his sheep.

That's the attitude that we are meant to follow, putting others ahead of ourselves. Especially those other sheep from other religious folds.

How can I serve them? Not, "how can I win"? Not "how can I convert?" Not "what can I get out of this experience?" Not even "what can I learn?" Those things all center ourselves. "How can I lay down my life to serve, in the way of Jesus?" That's the question.

Let's lead with that.

May you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, wherever this week takes you. May you seek understanding and peace among those who see the world differently than you do. And may you know the goodness of God's presence all over this beautiful, bountiful pasture.