

John 10:22-30
Amalia Vagts
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church 4/17/16

When you hear the Gospel read each Sunday, what do you hear? What are the words that grab you?

Are you panicking that I'm going to call on you? Should I read it again?

Don't worry – my point is we could talk about so many things.

I want to talk about sheep.

I was with a friend this week who is a veterinarian. So I asked her to tell me about sheep. Well, first and foremost, she said: they are completely defenseless. They have to stay together in the herd, because the moment one is alone, it is vulnerable to a host of predators. What about when they are in the herd? I asked her – are they safe then? Not the ones on the edges, she replied. Even the most careful shepherd cannot protect them all – there are too many edges of the herd, too many vulnerable on the margins.

But we are no ordinary sheep. And we have no ordinary shepherd. Our shepherd – the Good Shepherd says to the sheep, “No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

Nothing can separate us from God.

Has there been a time that you felt vulnerable on the edge?

Or how about safe in the middle, only to have the flock turn course, and you suddenly found yourself out on the edges and desperately afraid?

Or perhaps you have always been on the edge of the herd, and each attempt you make to move towards safety is blocked by another in your path.

Maybe you have always been in the center – safe, unable to see what is beyond the sheep around you, wondering if your safety and security means insecurity for others. – Or, stuck in the middle, you can't understand the fears those on the edges face.

If we spend all of our time wondering about our own safety or the safety of others, we won't go very far.

...But think of the liberation that awaits if we only listen to our Shepherd's voice and believe:

I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will take snatch them out of my hand.

Jesus invites us into a different way of being in the flock. In fact, isn't it right, Pastor Amy, that when we talked about this passage you pointed out to me that edge is where the Shepherd is?

Some of you know I've served as the director of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries since 2006, just after I moved back to Decorah. This is a national ministry in the Lutheran Church that began in San Francisco in the 1980's and now extends across the church. It exists because of people who believe that lesbian and gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (or LGBTQ) people have extraordinary gifts for ministry. Through their public witness, LGBTQ pastors enrich and transform our church. It is the work of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries to support these leaders and allied congregations and ministries – and to shine a light on the places where the sins of discrimination, intolerance, and complacency still exist in the church.

This is the work I do as my full-time profession – and it is also deeply personal.

I came out as a bisexual person in stages – to myself around grade, and with more clarity in late high school. To my friends and immediate family over the first few years of college. To my grandparents in my mid-20's, when I was in my first serious relationship. And, possibly, to some of you today who don't know me or have only seen me with David and assumed I was straight. Coming out is a lifelong process.

My faith path was much more direct from the beginning. According to my mother's notes in my baby book, my first sentence was "God is great," from the table prayer our family said before each meal. Church was the center of our family life, and of mine. I did every job a kid could in church growing up – attending church camp and national youth gatherings. At Luther College, my declared "pre-seminary" degree scored me a sweet gig working for the esteemed Dr. Bradley Hanson. I was cruising along in the center of the flock.

But that day came when I found myself out on the edge of the flock when I started realizing that the church denomination that claimed to love me, would reject me and other LGBTQ people based solely on who we loved.

So today's Gospel speaks to me because I can tell you two absolute truths. First, I'm part of the church today because of the outrageous claim that Jesus makes in our Gospel – that the Good Shepherd never allows us to be taken away. And second, because of Reconciling in Christ congregations, there are others in the flock to remind me of that truth.

I am so thankful for Reconciling in Christ congregations like ours that explicitly name welcome to LGBTQ people. It matters. For far too long, far too many have told the lie that there is something inherently wrong with LGBTQ people. God's truth is that all of us are beautifully, wonderfully made and that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identifying people are beloved exactly for who we are.

It matters that congregations like Good Shepherd proclaim this in big and small ways. It matters to LGBTQ people like me that we say this in our bulletin. It matters to transgender and gender queer people that we have bathrooms where they feel welcome and safe. It matters that we don't assume people are heterosexual – or gay. It matters that we continue to work to expand our welcome and create spaces of true belonging for all people.

Why does it matter - why are LGBTQ people extraordinarily gifted for ministry? Here are some of the things I've witnessed. LGBTQ people tell the truth about ourselves and we make space for others to tell us their truths. When prevented from the "usual" route we find new ways – in our careers, in our families, in our social lives. In a congregation, time and time again I see LGBTQ pastors willing to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. LGBTQ pastors are faithful – staying in churches, following calls to ministry when the church says no, not yet, and not that way over and over again. LGBTQ people rely on knowing our Shepherd's voice and knowing our Shepherd keeps us safe.

In our congregation, we are called to the edge of the flock to share the rich, bold, open promise of God –

You will have life, and never perish.

You will be surrounded by a community who cares for you.

God will wipe every tear from your eyes.

These promises made real in our baptism are made real to our sibling Natalie Tapscott in a new way today as Natalie is baptized.

Natalie – today you will be baptized and soon you will be confirmed – and this is so good, because you will have two milestones, two stories, two places to turn to when you wonder about what you've gotten yourself into.

You are entering a period in your life that is likely to be full of questions. You may find yourself at the edge of the flock. You may willingly choose to go there – more space, better air, and a view of the hillside. Go to the edge. Your Shepherd says, "No one can take you from me." This day, the day that you stand here with all of us around you – from your parents, Noah and Samantha to your church family – Justine and Reg and Vern and Keegan and Kim and Ed and Norma and Pastor Amy – we surround you. We, and this day and your baptism will always be with you.

Natalie you are part of the flock of Good Shepherd. And Good Shepherd is a congregation that has been bold enough to live with an eye towards the edge of the flock – and in doing so – we see others who are on the edge.

The predators around and inside of us are many. But God never leaves us. Natalie – when you doubt, when you question, when you forget – God never leaves you. Friends who are LGBTQ and other –when you, like me, live day after day in a church denomination that still really doesn't get us – God never leaves you. Friends here at Good Shepherd, regardless of what you daily face– God never leaves you.

There are many in the center of the flock. There is openness and new life on the edges. While the dangers around us may be more obvious, the promise we have received and will hear again today in Natalie's baptism - this is constant.

You are beloved, known, safe, and freed into new life.

This can never be taken from us.

Amen