

“The Big Church Truth”
Sermon on John 10:1-10 (and Psalm 65) by Rev. Berry French
as part of the Truth-Telling Summer worship series
at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, July 23, 2017

Introduction

In an effort to be inclusive to everyone in the room, I think it’s kind to say up front that today is my final Sunday at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church as your Associate Pastor. My wife, Katie and I and our two children are moving onto a sailboat to spend the next couple years sailing primarily in the Caribbean. Katie and I feel strongly that this is a call from God, and we believe it is a good decision for this season of our family’s life. Both our families are supportive and excited for us.

While I’m aware that this isn’t necessarily what most pastors do ... there are hundreds of cruising families around the world today. I also want to assure you that we have prudent plans to make sure that our family is safe, while seeking the adventurous and simple life of cruising as a family while our children are young and we think easily homeschool-able.

Here at this threshold of saying goodbye and preparing for the adventure before us, I am filled with grief over having to say goodbye and find ways to mutually bless one another. But **deeper than the grief is gratitude** – a profound thankfulness for the years of ministry that we’ve shared together:

The baptisms and confirmations, the births and funerals, the youth trips and hospital visits. You have let me learn and make mistakes. You have trusted me and been honest with me. You have **allowed me to be your pastor** ... to challenge you, to pray for you, and to cry with you. You have loved me and loved our family well. This is the only church our children know ... y’all baptized both of them and have held true to your promises. You’ve showered them with love and with freedom; and for that we are grateful. **Thanks be to God** for the privilege of serving as your pastor for these past five and a half years.

Now, let us to turn to a **more lasting word from the One** who knows each one of us by name and invites us into life in the fullest. Today’s reading is from the Gospel of John, where we encounter Jesus teaching in parables and presenting himself as both the Good Shepherd whose voice is known to the sheep, and as the Gate where the sheep are led into safety AND let out to go and find pasture.

Scripture: John 10:1-10

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the **shepherd of the sheep**. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the

gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will **come in and go out** and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly!**

Sermon

Today's truth-telling is about the Church ... the big Church. Church with a big C ... as in the Church of Jesus Christ. So I want to tell you some of my stories about the big Church. I grew up in a healthy Presbyterian church about the size of Black Mountain Pres. It was the church my father grew up in and we had a great youth program when I was coming along. I also fell in with an excellent Presbyterian Campus Ministry program in college at Carolina. And I remain deeply grateful for my upbringing in the Presbyterian Church.

But when I graduated from Carolina 14 years ago, I spent the two years between college and seminary traveling internationally – experiencing other cultures – and paying attention to how the global Church expressed herself in various cultures and faith traditions. Those two years traveling through Central America and visiting friends in Southern Africa not only shaped who I am as a person and as a pastor, but it was also the primary way God called me to seminary.

Now I suppose I've always had a travel bug. I celebrated my 20th birthday with Katie in New Zealand and since then, I've tried to spend some time every year out of the United States to gain perspective and expand my understanding of God and God's world. For me, somehow I'm more attentive to God's nudging when I'm in new places and new experiences.

So after graduating college, my college roommate and I spent 4 months backpacking through Central America connecting with missionaries and church folk of all varieties of denominations. We spent time with fundamental non-denominational missionaries in Honduras. We spent time in the Presbytery of Suchi – the same Guatemalan Presbytery that holds our partner church Eben-Ezer.

We spent time with missionaries from all over the global map and all over the theological map. And we spent time with lots of local Christians - mostly Catholic. I attended Mass at the neighborhood Catholic church in Antigua dozens of mornings before attending language school. Now that was before I knew Spanish, so I was mostly at Mass to observe families and individuals in worship, to soak in the songs, and take in the smells, sights, and sounds of that church.

I was fascinated at the various ways that peoples express the Christian faith through worship and mission and daily life. That fascination is what led me to seminary. I knew I gravitated towards certain expressions of the Christian faith, and away from others, but I didn't have the theological framework to know why. I wanted to explore how I believed God to be at work in the world in spite of the crippling poverty we encountered, and how God's Church - in her variety of expressions - continues Christ ministry today in cultures all over the world.

But before starting seminary, I spent two months in Africa visiting a handful of friends that I'd met working at Camp Sea Gull when I returned from Central America. Knowing the chance to be hosted by local friends in South Africa and Zambia doesn't come around every

day, when they invited me to come, I went. We spent two months traveling from South Africa to Kenya over ground through Zambia and Malawi and Tanzania.

Patrick Scichalwe, my roommate at Camp Sea Gull that fall, met us at the bus terminal after the 14 hour bus ride from Johannesburg to Lusaka. With our eyes wide open and a thousand questions on our lips, Patrick took us to his family's farm outside the capital city where – just as he had promised – his family slaughtered a pig and invited the community to come celebrate. It was a time of deep connection with Patrick's family. And that Sunday, we worshipped with Patrick's family at their home church – the United Church of Zambia. Now the United Church of Zambia in Lusaka isn't that much like Black Mountain Presbyterian Church ... nor was it like First Presbyterian Church in Lumberton where I grew up. But it was the Church. It was unfamiliar to me and it was beautiful. It was and is a faithful and powerful expression of the Church.

And God continued to open up my eyes to the global Church in her **beautifully diverse forms**. We left Patrick's farm to travel by bus to Malawi to meet Nancy and Frank Dimmock who were serving as Presbyterian missionaries in Malawi at the time. They welcomed us into their home and into their family life and we slept on their floor and traveled around with them to experience a day-in-the-life of a missionary for a week. Frank and Nancy Dimmock exposed us to the Church's work in Malawi – providing elementary schools and colleges, hospitals and safe drinking water to the people – and *always* training up local leaders.

And then a decade later, I got to serve as Nancy's parent's pastor and Frank's sister's pastor. You see Nancy Dimmock is Polly and Dave Miller's daughter, and Frank Dimmock is Ellen Begley's brother. And of course Black Mountain Pres has supported the Dimmocks for decades.

Simultaneously, the Church is so small and also so BIG! The Church is Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, and our PCUSA denomination. AND the Church is also all of the churches and denominations that each of you have ever been part of. God's big Church is all the tiny and huge gatherings of believers all over the globe with all stripes of denominational ties, or no denominational ties at all, with all kinds of **theological nuances that each emphasizes faithful parts of God's nature**. It takes the Church in all **her various and beautiful expressions** to continue Christ ministry.

And we are all connected because we are the body of Christ, the Church universal. We are all part of that big "C" Church!

We are the Church when we gather together to worship and pray and sing, Sunday after Sunday in this space. We are the Church when our youth gathered to share communion on sandy, windy Folly Beach after a weekend of youth Sunday planning in January.

We are the Church when we have the chance to be prayed over by the faithful members of Eben-Ezer Church in Guatemala. We are the Church when we've gather with the faithful at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and catch the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing through that faithful expression of the Church. We are the Church when we gather to worship and break bread with our homeless brothers and sisters in Asheville at Haywood Street.

We are the Church – you are the Church when you gather in each other's homes for Presbyterian Women circles, or young adult supper clubs, or our mom's group, or men's

groups. We are the Church – you are the Church when you gather under the shade trees sharing lemonade and cookies while the energetic Middle school youth are washing your cars ... and you're also the church when you're on top of the Church bus scrubbing another year's worth of grime off the bus roof.

You are the Church when you pray with your children before bedtime, or teach dinner blessings to your own children or your neighbor's children. You are the Church when you gather at Montreat or Massanetta with hundreds of other young people to sing and dance your hearts out.

You are the Church as you visit one another in the hospital or in each other's homes. You are the Church when you gather around tables for Potato Lunches or Funeral receptions. You are the CHURCH! We are the Church.

Whether we are gathered in a brick and mortar sanctuary with full time paid staff leading us in worship, or whether we are telling stories on a hillside and gathering around meals in homes, like Jesus did Church ... the Church is the people of faith gathered to **love God and love neighbor**.

This abundant life Jesus offers us is about **relationship**. It's about our **identity as beloved children** of God. It's about noticing God at work in the world around us – in the beauty of creation, in the depth of real relationship, the joy of pure laughter, and in the mercy of caring for our neighbor.

This abundant life is about remembering that the Good Shepherd calls us by name, offers us safety inside the gate, and also leads us out to go and find good pasture. The good pasture that the Psalmist calls pastures of the wilderness that overflow, and hills that gird themselves with joy – the creation that shouts and sings together for JOY!ⁱ

Psalms 65 and Mary Oliver's poemⁱⁱ on the front of your bulletin seem to go hand in hand. They both invite us to pay attention – to kneel in the grass and be idle and blessed. **For gratitude** is one the **most faithful responses to God's grace** and God's good gifts.

In this next season we are being called into, Katie and I hope our family experiences life more closely connected to Creation and the natural rhythms of the earth – the sunrise and sunset, the lunar cycles and the tides. We're hoping to pay attention and to join our voice with the Psalmist in giving thanks for creation.

And I hope and pray that we **will be the Church as a family** as we live with intention and teach our children about the care of creation ... with our day in and day out dependence upon the tides and the wind and the fish of the sea.

I hope and pray and trust that we will be the Church when we gather with strangers in hot, open-air sanctuaries where God's people have gathered to worship - in English or in Spanish.

I hope and pray and trust that when we find ourselves anchored next to a fascinating family from Australia or South Africa that we'll find ways to be the Church together: as we share meals and stories; as our children play together, and swim together, and laugh together; as we talk about life and creation and the role of faith in our own lives.

I hope and pray and trust that as we **pay attention to what God is up to in the various cultures** we'll experience, that God expands our understanding the global Church. I hope and

pray and trust that God will use our family and our gifts to care for and minister to those around us.

Black Mountain Pres - y'all know how to be the Church. Y'all are good at caring for each other, caring for the vulnerable, and sharing the faith in compelling and lasting ways with the coming generations. The challenge for us today is how **will YOU be the Church in your own daily living?** In what ways is God calling **you into abundant life?**

Friends, I wonder how the Good Shepherd might be leading you out to receive life in the fullest? Katie and I believe we're following the **truest way** for us to move into abundant life right now. And that after this season of cruising, we trust that there will be another chapter of ministry and life in the fullest that God will call us into.

So what about you? **What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?**
Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 65: 12-13

ⁱⁱ *The Summer Day*, by Mary Oliver. First printed in *House of Light* (Beacon Press, 1990).