

*“Believers Are Unified!”*

This is a sermon about the nature of the Church. **Our Scriptures show we are called to follow Jesus Christ and be part of the unified community of believers.** An important motive is to show the world our Divine Parent sent Jesus and God “agape” loves humanity.

The John 10:1-17 Reading continued the debate between Jesus and the Jewish authorities after he cured a man who was born blind on a Sabbath. **Jesus pointedly inferred the Pharisees were spiritually blind – guilty of not recognizing he was sent by God. Indeed, instead of seeing the Truth, they were guilty of plotting to kill him!** In verses 1-5 Jesus told the Parable of the Shepherd and explained how a flock of sheep only listens to the voice of their shepherd. The Pharisees refused to listen to his voice – because they rejected Jesus and conspired to kill him.

In the parable, Jesus reminded everyone about the way sheep were protected in a pen with a gate. He went on to share how he is the Gate for the sheep and he is the Good Shepherd.

Alluding to the leadership of the Pharisees and the other Religious Authorities, **Jesus said in verses 7-9, “I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. All others who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Those who come in by me will be saved; they will come in and go out and find pasture.”** Further contrasting himself with the Religious Authorities of his day, **Jesus continued in verses 10-11, “The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness. I am the Good Shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep.”**

I am not quite sure why Jesus then changed the metaphor he used to represent the Religious Authorities from “thief” to “hired man”. With this modification in terminology, Jesus went on to further explain the contrast between his willingness to suffer for the sheep versus the abuse carried out on the people by the Religious Authorities. **In verses 12-13 Jesus said, “When the hired man, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep.”** So, unlike the hired man, the Good Shepherd – Jesus cares about the flock and is willing to die for them. **Indeed, Jesus died as the ultimate expression of God’s Self-giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love for us!**

To make his intended message perfectly clear to both the people in general and to the Religious Authorities, **Jesus boldly declared in verses 14-15, “I am the Good Shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them.”**

In that quote, Jesus disclosed the special nature of his relationship with his sheep – his followers or believers – what is later called the Church – the Body of Christ. Our relationship with Jesus is very close and personal, just as is his relationship with the Divine Parent. Hopefully, most parents and grandparents are willing to experience significant suffering for their children. Likewise, God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love for all people – for us – the Almighty’s Children in this world is the reason our Divine Parent sent the Only Son to suffer, to die, and to be raised from the dead. Not only was Jesus willing to fulfill God’s Loving Purpose by dying for us as the embodiment of the Creator’s “Agape” Love but Christ actually chose to also live self-giving and suffering “agape” love for us at the cost of his mortal life. **He, not only, was willing “to die for” his flock but he actually did die for us!**

Then Jesus revealed additional, surprising information about the people who are among his sheep – his flock – his believers! **Jesus said in verse 16, “There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become one flock with One Shepherd.”** The meaning of what Jesus meant by those words is not clear. Some have interpreted what he said to mean the other sheep were the gentiles – the non-Jews but his intention is actually a mystery. Given that the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke join the Gospel of John in revealing Jesus welcomed many outcasts of the Jewish Society – Samaritans, other foreigners, tax collectors, those with dreaded skin diseases, and other persons the Pharisees would call “sinners”, **those additional sheep of a different sheep pen certainly include all of the outcasts and the rejected of society, who believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah.**

Unfortunately, a large number of folks claiming to be believers refuse to even consider the possibility of outcasts and society’s rejected ones being part of the flock of believers. **Indeed, a multitude of potential believers feel rejected**

**by one or more local church or denomination because of their very negative personal experiences resulting from such judgmental and self-righteous behavior.** A significant number of our members and participants have gone through such rejection and have found our radical hospitality, welcome, and invitation to be attractive and healing – as a powerful expression of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love! **Recognizing this truth and reality, our boards intentionally emphasize our openness, radical welcome and acceptance, and following Jesus’ self-giving “agape” love.**

As a Star Trek fan, I hope the other sheep Jesus was talking about may also include other believers on distant planets! Clearly, Jesus’ message includes the truth and promise all followers of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God are part of One Flock – the Body of Christ, so no believer can be separated from the community of believers – the Church. **This means no believer can be faithfully excluded from the Body of Christ, as well as, no believer can voluntarily exclude his or her self from any expression of the community of believers.** Further, being active in the community of believers – the Church is not one of merely observing her from a distance.

Our second Reading today from John 17:6-23 includes a part of Jesus’ prayer to the Divine Parent, which he prayed in front of his disciples during his last evening before his death. In this portion of the prayer, Jesus prayed for his followers – the believers. **Jesus prayed in verse 9, “I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those You gave me, for they belong to You.”** He prayed for the protection and wellbeing of his flock. Specifically, Jesus sought the unity of everyone, who believes in him – both those, who were present with him during his prayer, and those who would come to believe in him.

**Jesus prayed in verses 20-23, “I pray not only for them, but also for those who believe in me because of their message. I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as You are in me and I am in You. May they be one, so that the world will believe that You sent me. I gave them the same glory You gave me, so that they may be one, just as You and I are one: I in them and You in me”.**

The motivation for why Jesus prayed for unity among his followers was, in part, to benefit his original disciples and the earliest believers, as they struggled to become the Community of Believers – the Body of Christ – the Church. But, another important reason was mentioned when **Jesus prayed in verse 23b, “that they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that You sent me and that You love them as You love me.”** So, part of the motivation for Christian unity is the welfare of the Church. Yet, another is to demonstrate to the world how God sent Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God’s Glory – our Divine Parent’s Self-Giving and Suffering “Agape” Love for us! An additional and powerful motive for us to manifest Christian Unity is to honor Christ’s desires.

Our two Scripture Readings remind us of our need to be part of the community of believers - the Church. They also call us to manifest the unity for which Jesus prayed. **Thus, we are called to show the world God sent Jesus Christ because the Divine Parent and Jesus the Son of God love us with that “agape” self-giving and sacrificial love! Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, seeks to manifest greater unity by welcoming everyone – including people of all Christian backgrounds and assuming their previous experience is valid, instead of demanding re-baptism in a certain way or believing a certain dogma.** The United Church of Christ was born to manifest the unity Jesus Christ desires. Indeed, the United Church of Christ motto comes from when **Jesus prayed in John 17:21, “that they may all be one”.**

Jesus calls us to be unified in believing in him. We are to be unified by actively living Jesus’ and our Divine Parent’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love in and through the community of believers – the Church – the Body of Christ in our Fellowship, Study, Service! **Listen to our Good Shepherd’s voice and follow him and his life of self-giving and sacrificial love. Seek to discern the ways you can live out “agape” love and unity in Jesus Christ. Let’s be a Unified Community of Believers! Amen.**