“***There Will Be One Flock***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Apr. 25, 2021

**1 John 3:18–24**

18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. . .

23 This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

**John 10:11–18**

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

The message of Jesus throughout this Easter season was comforting, reassuring, and empowering for the apostles, and it is for us, as well. The Apostle John, in his letter, also speaks reassuring and empowering words. He says God reassures us whenever our hearts condemn us, for God knows us better than we know ourselves. If we love, if we manifest love in our deeds, then we know we are from the truth, and God will reassure us, even if we feel guilty or inadequate in our hearts. Why does he bring up this problem with self-doubt or self-condemnation? Probably because it is a very common feature among religious people. It is often the religious who are inclined to judge and condemn themselves. John wants to prevent that painful experience. He tells us that we are abiding in the Son if we obey the great commandment to love one another, as John agreed to take care of Mary, after Jesus’ departure, or as Peter loved some of the new converts he made, as when he told one person “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (Acts 3:6). John says we can know we are abiding in the Son because of the Spirit that abides within us. The Spirit in us assures us that we are in the Son. So take courage whenever your heart would condemn you. Remember the reassuring words of John’s letter, his love letter to believers. As Jesus reassured the apostles, John was reassuring early Christians.

Now, the gospel passage focuses on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. These folks were close enough to the rural life that they probably knew people who kept flocks. He says the true and good shepherd protects the sheep at all costs. In fact, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This is a statement about heroic love; about love in action. It says nothing about paying a debt of sin or satisfying God’s wrath. It is only about the love and protectiveness of the Son, who is the true shepherd. “The hired hand runs away” (10:13), but the shepherd does not. And Jesus’ death did protect his apostles and buy some time for them. The Sadducees thought they would kill the movement by killing its leader, but they were wrong. Jesus did save the apostles from immediate retaliation so that they were able to bring the word to many nations, although some apostles ended up later giving their lives for the cause. Jesus set in motion a community of reassurance, forgiveness, and inclusion that is still growing stronger today, sometimes outside the boundaries of churches.

The heroic death of Jesus is part of the gospel story, and part of the revelatory life that he lived. His non-retaliatory response to his being framed and railroaded unto death was impressive, and at least one person, the supervising centurion, was impressed enough by his behavior that he said “Truly this man was God’s son!” (Mark 15:39).

The strangest part of the saying is “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (10:16). This has stimulated much speculation. A common interpretation is that the sheep who are not yet gathered in are the Gentiles. Some of his post-resurrection appearances were to Gentiles, and they became members of the early churches. A less common but interesting interpretation is that the other sheep are human races on other worlds, who are part of Jesus’ cosmic family. Can you picture that? At the very least, there is a host of God’s children beyond just this planet. A psalm says “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps 33:6). That could refer to angels, but many have speculated that earth is not the only inhabited planet. In Hebrews we read: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God” (Heb 11:3). Could some of these worlds be inhabited planets in other solar systems? Theologian Ted Peters says “It’s time to invite astrotheologians and astroethicists into our living rooms to guide our imaginations and to prepare us for what might become startling new discoveries. Jesus says in John 10:16, ‘I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.’ What might this mean in a space age?” (<https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2018/10/stars-planets-and-gods-extraterrestrial-sheep/>). Just as the grain comes from many hills and is gathered into one loaf, perhaps there are many planets in Jesus’ realm who will one day be gathered into one heavenly community. Just as one day we will meet our family and friends who have passed on, maybe we will also meet people from other worlds. We know that the result will be “There will be one flock, one shepherd” (10:16)—but we aren’t told if the flock will include people from other worlds.

Another key theme in the gospel passage is Jesus’ own power to raise himself up. This gospel never says that the Father would raise Jesus up, but only that Jesus himself would do it. It seems to be a point that the author is stressing, in contrast with what some other Christians authors say: “God raised him from the dead” (Rom 10:9), as Paul said. But in John, Jesus has the power to raise himself. He says, “I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (10:18). The Fourth Evangelist spells out more about the divine power of Jesus than do the other gospels, including his role as revealer of the Father. “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).

No other part of the New Testament says as much about the special powers of Jesus as the Gospel of John. Jesus is the life who came into the world, and his life is the light of the world (John 1:4, 9). Further, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him” (1:10). He is the creator of the world. In Hebrews, it is “worlds” plural (1:3; 11:3). In Colossians, it is “all things,” as it says: “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). These thrones, dominions, and powers seem to be angelic or other kinds of heavenly authorities. We simply can’t rule out that he also created human races on other planets.

Let’s face it—we don’t know much about the full range of Jesus’ powers and significance. We will learn some day. We have to trust that we will learn whatever we *need* to learn in due course. In the meantime, as the psalmist says, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works” (139:14). That means *we* are wonderful, too! Each day is a gift from God for us to learn more about him and ourselves. We can take that opportunity daily to grow in the love offered to us and know that the Good Shepherd is here to help us if we call upon him. We are his sheep, and we will know his reassuring voice. His love notes resonate within us.