

## The Good Shepherd

It was an eventful week for our nation and particularly for our urgent need to at long last face up to and remedy four hundred years of ingrained racism.

The guilty verdict of Mr Chauvin for the killing of Mr Floyd was met, remarkably, not with dancing in the street by people of color, but by a quiet sense of relief.

The morning paper on Wednesday seemed to sum it up so well with its front page picture of an African American woman, eyes downcast, hand over her heart.

You could almost hear her finally able to exhale.

Here at home, a teenage Chuukese boy, who was an acolyte at our own Cathedral, was shot multiple times by our own police.

A South African man, just weeks later, unarmed like the boy, also shot dead.

And here we sit on the feast day of the Good Shepherd.

Perhaps you are wondering, what does the Good Shepherd have to say to us today, in the midst of so much fear, misunderstanding and even hate?

The story of Jesus as the Good Shepherd usually fills us with feelings of sweetness and joy.

A touching, consoling image.

We find Jesus the good shepherd on lovely Hallmark cards.

And we often recall this image at funerals, when we really do need to feel some comfort, some consolation.

But John's gospel doesn't see the Good Shepherd that way.

Jesus calls himself the good shepherd right in the midst of his blow up with the Pharisees, in his razor sharp critique of the status-quo (Latin for "don't bother me, I like everything just the way it is!").

Jesus says he's the good shepherd right after confronting the religious bosses with the fact that their love affair with good and evil is all messed up.

The morality police, who insist they know right from wrong, are, according to the good shepherd, nothing more than blind guides.

"I came into this world for judgment so that those who don't see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

That's where Jesus is immediately before today's action.

As he heals a man born blind.

The religious big shots go nuts.

They put the healed man, then his parents, then Jesus himself, under the bare light bulb of the interrogation room.

"The healed man is a fraud," they say, as they boot him from the temple.

"Because," they say, "everyone knows that God is punishing those who are differently abled."

"God rewards the rich and powerful," they say.

"God is angry with those who are sick or poor or black."

And Jesus says, to their chagrin and ours, "None of that is true."

In fact, that entire world-view is a sin.

It's the sin of self-contented navel gazing, where the good, the right and the just, just happen to look like "us."

While the bad, the evil, the corrupt, why, that looks like "them."

And the question for us today is whether anything has changed in the last 2000 years?

The Christian establishment often looks very much like the Pharisees Jesus so roundly criticizes.

By drawing lines between people.

Getting into bed with the powers that be.

Making judgments based on privilege and politics rather than on mercy and justice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was executed by the Nazis, says that:

"Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power and with its plea for the weak.

Christians do too little to drive these truths home.

Instead, the institutional church bends over backwards in its worship of power.

Christians need to give far more offense, to shake up the world far more often, than they do now.

Christians ought to favor the weak rather than engage in pitiful handwringing over the so-called 'rights' of the strong."

To belong to the Good Shepherd is to reject the way things are.

As Martin Luther King says:

"There was a time when the church was very powerful.

When the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for their beliefs.

In those days the church was not like a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion.

It was like a thermostat that transformed the values of society.

Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power went wild, accusing the Christians of being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.'

But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' called to obey God rather than man.

Small in number, they were big in commitment.

They were too God-intoxicated to be intimidated.

They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiator contests.

My how things have changed!

Today's church is too often a weak, ineffective, nervous voice.

So often it is an arch-defender of the status-quo.

Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure in the average community is consoled by the church's silent -- and often even vocal -- blessing of things as they are."

Letter from a Birmingham Jail, modified.

For most of us, living in the wealthiest nation on earth, we are enraptured with the way things are.

We are scared to death to up-end the delicious apple cart that keeps so many of us fat and happy.

Yet here comes Jesus, who delights in tossing over apple carts!

And the first apple cart to go is found in the answer to this question:

Who owns me?

The question about "who owns me" is a lot like the question of "who do I worship?"

The issue isn't whether I'll worship, it's only what or who do I worship?

Just so, it isn't whether I'm owned.

Only by what or by whom am I owned?

We don't have to dig too deep to see that our owners are the usual suspects.

Money.

Power.

Fame.

Dysfunctional relationships.

These things diminish who we are as human beings.

Reducing our lives to financial security or to freedom from danger or to society's totally boring definitions of beauty or success, sell us far short of the miracle that is every human being.

Our obsession with safety leads to \$700 billion military budgets while our schools struggle to buy books and desks.

The epidemic of homelessness, something rare in the US 40 years ago, is a direct consequence of failing to build low income housing – while creating an economy that depletes the poor as more and more gold is shoveled into the pockets of the rich.

Whenever we lower our gaze from the vastness of God's dream for all creation, and seek satisfaction in the cheap baubles of power, fame and money, we are diminished.

We are called to become, we are destined to become, not only lovers, but unconditional lovers.

Our destiny is to be like God.

To be one with God.

To love like God.

And to know what it is to be loved by God.

But if we're to reach that place of sublime beauty, we need to submit to our true owner.

This beautiful shepherd who stops at nothing, not even death, even death on the cross, to have us all.

Because, if Jesus owns me, I get a fresh set of eyes when it comes to what truly matters in this life.

If Jesus owns me, status and security and safety can be released.

And being open-hearted, self-examining, vulnerable, finding the courage, the willingness to speak up for justice, to speak up on behalf of the least among us, why, these begin to shine as the truly urgent tasks in life!

If Jesus owns me, the way things are begins to melt away into the way things can and might become.

So dear friends, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." 1 Jn. 3:17.

For such is the life of those who love the good shepherd.

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