

## The Good Shepherd

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, on days we really do need to feel some comfort, some consolation.

Yet that's not how the author of St. John's gospel intends this story to be heard.

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 (which is Latin for "don't bother me, I like everything just the way it is!").

The story of the good shepherd comes right on the heels of Jesus confronting the religious know-it-alls with the fact that what they think is "good" and what they think is "evil" is all twisted up.

The morality police are having a blast declaring right from wrong, insisting that they alone see clearly enough to make those judgments, only to have Jesus call them nothing more than blind guides.

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

That's what Jesus says just before we get to today's action.

Here's the context.

Just before today's gospel, Jesus heals a man born blind.

The religious big wigs go nuts, and interrogate the man healed, his parents and finally Jesus.

They insist that the healed man is a fraud and they kick him out of the temple, as they will soon do to Jesus.

They have created a system that defines good and evil, and Jesus says that this is precisely the root cause of their blindness, of their sin.

They sin, meaning, they separate themselves from God, which is the definition of sin, when they decide what is good and what is evil, rather than leaving those judgments to God. Paul Nuechterlein, paraphrased.

That's our sin too, because far too often, what's "good" is what benefits me; and what's "evil" is what threatens to harm me.

But what about when my benefits come at the expense of other people?

What about when what harms me actually benefits someone else?

It's the sin of self-contented navel gazing, and the question for us today is whether anything has changed in the last 2000 years, for believers, and for the church?

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 this:

"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 make these points clear...

The institutional church adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power.

Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now.

Christians should favor the weak rather than engage in pitiful handwringing over the so-called rights of the strong." From Bishop Bob's letter to diocese, modified.

To belong to the Good Shepherd is NOT to belong to the way things are.

As Martin Luther King says:

"There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.

In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for 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 gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now.

So often today's church is a weak, ineffective voice with an uncertain sound.

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

Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of 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, the champion apple cart tosser of all time.

So let's hunker down a bit and see if maybe we can take a peek or two at what Jesus, the good shepherd, is so desperately trying to get us to see today.

When we get right down to it, it's all about ownership.

As in, who owns me?

Who owns you?

And if we're honest, we can admit these are hard questions.

After all, we are citizens of the land of the free, the home of the brave!

Nobody owns us!

Except, we don't have to look too far to see that's just not true.

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?

The fact is our owners are the usual suspects: money, power, fame, botox, dysfunctional relationships, alcohol, drugs, and reputation.

And the problem with being owned by such things is that 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, these all sell us way short of the miracle we are each of us created to become.

Our obsession with safety leads to \$700 billion military budgets while our schools struggle to buy books and desks, while too many children go to bed hungry.

It leads to that white fellow in Detroit last week who shot at a black high school student whose crime was to knock on the shooter's door to ask for directions.

Our obsessions with anything that is less than God only diminish us, and it is from that danger that the good shepherd comes to the rescue.

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

Our fate 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 going to get to this place of sublime beauty, we need to submit to our true owner: this beautiful shepherd who will stop 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 actually matters in this life.

If Jesus owns me, status and security and safety can be let go, and being open-hearted, self-examining, vulnerable, finding the courage, the willingness to step up for social justice, to speak up on behalf of the least of these, why, these things 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 ought to be.

So "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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