

“Looking Out For The Little Guy”

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UCC at The Villages, Florida
April 26th, 2015

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

‘And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold;

I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice.

So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.’

John 10:16

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be looking out for those who are most vulnerable in our midst.

Help us to see them for who they are as people who deserve love and respect.

Amen

If you ever visited an UCC church in Pennsylvania

more than likely it was an E&R congregation – Evangelical & Reformed.

The style of the architecture at these churches brings to mind

the medieval Catholic and Lutheran roots of the Evangelical side –

and that means lots of stained glass.

The theme I had seen most often pictured in those stained glass windows

of rural UCC churches in Pennsylvania, was of “The Good Shepherd”

based on a classic painting by Bernhard Plockhorst.

“The Good Shepherd” is one of the very first representations of Christ in art –
rivaling the image of the Cross which became more widely used over time.

As far as we know from our scripture and tradition,

Jesus did not literally tend a flock of sheep, though he is the ‘Son of David’ –

King David of Israel who had been a shepherd as a boy

and to whom the 23rd Psalm is attributed: *The Lord is my shepherd...*

However, for the early Christian church, Jesus was their shepherd

watching over them and guiding them.

Not all shepherds are good –

in our lesson today from the Gospel of John, chapter 10:13,

Jesus described that kind shepherd as a hired hand

who had no emotional connection to the flock.

So when wolves show up,

He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep.

Instead, Jesus tells us that the character of a ‘good shepherd’ is of someone

who would lay down their life for the sheep – to sacrifice one’s life,

which is what Jesus said he would do and it is what he did.

Willard, p.2

Even good shepherds keep sheep for food as well as for their wool,
so that means killing a lamb to eat.

Lambs were also used for sacrifice during the Jewish festival of Passover –
an ancient part of Jewish tradition that is no longer practiced.

The role of sacrifice, though, goes way back to hunter-gatherer societies
of prehistoric times and served several purposes:

First of all, sacrifice was a thanksgiving offering and plea
that the animal come back to share its flesh again with human-kind.

The ritual of sacrifice was also a reenactment of the hunt
and a way for sensitive people to reconcile the fact
that they had to kill in order to eat and survive.

Sacrifice also became a way of demonstrating remorse
through a surrogate as a valuable substitute – but a substitute just the same.

Sacrifice as sanctified violence could also become a way
to control a population, instilling fear to insure cooperation.

Though not called ‘sacrifice’, this mechanism of violence
as a means of maintaining order is alive and well in our world.

With regard to ‘shepherding’ people in a society,
the sacrifice of scapegoats is not effective in the long run.

Instead a ‘good shepherd’ is one who is looking out for the little guy
even at the risk of self-sacrifice for those in one’s care.

However, when that does not happen and the ‘hireling’ neglects the flock –
when we don’t look out for the little guy in our society –
those whom Jesus called ‘the least of these’, then we better watch out!

Nigeria... Syria... and even Ferguson, Missouri-ah.
provide good examples of a bad situation when the proper authorities
neglect their people and leave a power vacuum,
to be filled by opportunistic gangsters, bringing on more violence.

Author Gil Bailey wrote a book in 1995 based on the theories of Rene Girard
called Violence Unveiled.

He explained how societies re-establish order in the midst of escalating violence
by punishing a scapegoat; Though that ploy doesn’t last long.

However, he agrees with Girard that Christ’s sacrificial death on the Cross
has changed this scenario by exposing it –
though that change has been slow and with painful consequences.

Gil Bailey supports this claim that Christ has made a difference;

Part of his argument was references to two quotes –
one from a 20th Century poet and one from a 19th Century philosopher...

Willard, p.3

In his epic poem about the Christmas story called, "For The Time Being",
W.H. Auden included the incident of Herod the Great trying to kill Christ
by murdering the children of Bethlehem.

Herod is portrayed as reflecting on the danger
of what the Messiah represents, when he says:

Reason will be replaced by Revelation...

*Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal virtue,
and fear of retribution will vanish...*

*The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively
of hermits, bums, and permanent invalids.*

*The Rough Diamonds, the Consumptive Whore,
the bandit who is good to his mother,*

*the epileptic girl who has a way with animals
will be the heroes and heroines of the New Age,
when the general, the statesman, and the philosopher
have become the butt of every farce and satire.*

W.H. Auden wrote this in 1942 – during WWII, and this is compared
to the words of the 19th Century philosopher of nihilism, Friedrich Nietzsche,
who openly condemned Christianity; Nietzsche said:

*I raise against the Christian church the most terrible of all accusations
that any accuser ever uttered...*

The Christian Church has left nothing untouched by its corruption...

The "equality of souls before God,"

*this falsehood, this pretext for the rancor of all base-minded,
this explosive of a concept which eventually became
revolution, modern idea, and the principle of decline
of the whole order of society – is Christian dynamite.*

Nietzsche was kind of a sour puss; He also wrote:

We are deprived of strength when we feel pity...

Some have dared to call pity a virtue

(in every noble ethic it is considered a weakness)...

By the way, Nietzsche was very likely an influence on that 20th Century 'Herod' –
Adolf Hitler.

What this means –

what these words of both W.H. Auden's 'Herod' and Nietzsche's contempt, imply,
is that what Jesus did worked!

The 'hermits' and the 'bums', and all other outcasts who are diamonds in the rough
have been lifted up and this 'Christian dynamite' is still at work; and that
this 'pity' – or compassion, that is so despised for weakening the strong,
is a credible threat to the injustices of the status quo.

Willard, p. 4

We who have been touched by the Good News of Christ
are a people that have been awakened to empathy for the victim –
whom Jesus called ‘the least of these’, the minority in our midst,
who is that little guy & gal who would otherwise be pushed to the side.
For we know in our heart of hearts that
if you don’t look out for the little guys, then you better watch out!

The kind of blindness exhibited by Herod and Nietzsche
that ignores the common humanity of vulnerable people,
led to the Holocaust against the Jews,
and the Holocaust against the Armenian people 20 years before.
This is the same mindset at work today among extremists.

In response to the murdering of 21 Coptic Christians in Libya,
a Coptic bishop from England, named Bishop Angaelous,
said he could forgive ISIS – that’s what we do as Christians.

In speaking about those 21 men, he said,
*They were sacrificed, but so much has come out of it.
[ISIS] brought the imminent dangers to marginalized peoples,
not just Christians, but Yazidis and others in the Middle East,
to the attention of the whole world.*

Then he said,
*I would like to see us all start to work towards human rights generally,
because when we’re divided... any change will be fragmented....
Of course, the vast majority of persecution falls squarely right now on
Christians in the Middle East and that needs to be addressed.
But, as a Christian, I will never be comfortable just safeguarding
the rights of Christians. We need to help everyone.*

This bishop sounds like a good shepherd for his people – and all people,
he sounds like someone who looks out for the little guys;
and what he suggests sounds like what is needed.

Friends, join me in saying the 23rd Psalm...

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me besides the still waters; He restoreth my soul
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen*

*Our lesson today from 1 John 3:16-24 emphasizes the significance of
God's loving-kindness for the most vulnerable –
and that we ought to do the same...*

- [13] Don't be surprised, brothers and sisters,
if the world hates you.
- [14] We know that we have transferred from death to life,
because we love the brothers and sisters.
The person who does not love remains in death.
- [15] Everyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer,
and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.
- [16] This is how we know love:
Jesus laid down his life for us,
and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.
- [17] But if a person has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need
and that person doesn't care—how can the love of God remain in him?
- [18] Little children, let's not love with words or speech
but with action and truth.
- [19] This is how we will know that we belong to the truth
and reassure our hearts in God's presence.
- [20] Even if our hearts condemn us,
God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.
- [21] Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us,
we have confidence in relationship to God.
- [22] We receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commandments
and do what pleases him.
- [23] This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,
and love each other as he commanded us.
- [24] The person who keeps his commandments remains in God
and God remains in him;
and this is how we know that he remains in us,
because of the Spirit that he has given to us.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

John 10:11-18

[Jesus said,]

[11] I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

[12] He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

[13] He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep.

[14] I am the good shepherd;

I know my own and my own know me,

[15] as the [Abba] Father knows me and I know the [Abba] Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

[16] And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold;

I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice.

So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.

[17] For this reason the [Abba] Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again.

[18] No 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 again; this charge I have received from my [Abba] Father.”