

Gentle Shepherd, Gentle Sheep

Ever since I came to Good Shepherd Baptist Church as your pastor in 2005, I've taken great delight in celebrating with you the fourth Sunday of Easter as "Good Shepherd Sunday." This Sunday received that designation for many Christians at the adoption of the Revised Common Lectionary as a way of honoring a far older tradition. Then, as now, the Gospel readings for "Good Shepherd Sunday" always come from the 10th chapter of the Gospel According to John, in which Jesus names himself as the Good Shepherd and teaches his disciples from that metaphor.

Obviously, the theme of the Good Shepherd holds deep resonance for those of us who gather here under that name. I've never talked with our church's organizing pastor, Rev. Bernie Turner, or any of the other folks who were around in the earliest days about the selection of the name "Good Shepherd Baptist Church" but Rev. Dr. Judy Gay's 1999 history of our congregation gives some interesting details. Did you know, for example, that the Steering Committee completely rejected a list of six suggestions from the naming committee, the first of which was "The Church of Our Savior?" Clearly, whatever the name, this has been a "Baptist" church from the very beginning. But when "Good Shepherd Baptist Church" was suggested, it gained instant popularity. The Steering Committee approved the new name with only one dissenting vote. Years later, Bernie Turner told Judy "that the name was selected because the shepherding spirit it reflected was seen as the appropriate kind of identification that would serve to attract a community of worshippers."

I suspect the Steering Committee had in mind attracting a rather larger community of worshippers than that which Good Shepherd has generally been over the years but I think there was nevertheless something inspired about the choice. It has seemed to me from my earliest days among you right up to now that the communal spirit and identity of this church reflects the identity of the Good Shepherd in very specific ways. I think this was best summed up for me two weeks ago, when Bernie Turner, before launching into his sermon for our 50th Anniversary Celebration said (in essence), "You all know what I'm going to say. I'm just going to tell you to love everybody." And, indeed, I think if Good Shepherd Baptist Church had a motto, it might well be "love everybody." The gentleness of that loving attitude is at the very heart of the picture of the Good Shepherd provided to us by Jesus in the Gospel of John and in other scriptures as well.

So I want to talk this morning about the gentleness of the Shepherd and how we as his sheep are also called to go gently in the world. We'll look at three of the scriptures suggested by the lectionary for today, Psalm 23, John 10 and I Peter 2, all of which we've now heard this morning. And I'll also attempt to hold up that image of the Good Shepherd in contrast to the news from the world around us, a world in which desperate people seek change in ways both violent and non-violent and in which execution and possibly torture are among the sanctioned policies of a mighty nation-empire that sometimes claims to be an exceptional manifestation of God's Kingdom on Earth.

The 23rd Psalm is usually attributed to that great king of Israel, David, the king after God's own heart. In referring to Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Sarah, as his shepherd, David knew whereof he spoke. I imagine most of us heard from the time we were small the stories of David the shepherd boy who grew up to be king. The stories in the Bible of David's early life portray

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an attractive youth whose felicity with harp and voice could soothe the troubled King Saul. When we match these stories with those of young David protecting his flock against lions and bears (but no tigers, oh my), we can quickly form an understanding of just what the older David means to convey with the image of the Lord of Hosts as a shepherd. With God's tender regard for the sheep and God's mighty arm of protection, we, the sheep, have nothing to fear in the direst of circumstances; not when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death; not when we are surrounded by enemies. The confident security of the sheep of God's pasture far exceeds that offered by any governmental security department: Homeland, Social or what have you.

Of course, we now read David's words through our experience with the teachings of "great David's greater Son," Jesus of Nazareth. In his life and words, Jesus taught that even if death should temporarily claim our bodies that a greater and joyous fate awaited us beyond the grave. And not only can God's Beloved feel secure when surrounded by enemies, we are actually called to love them along with the rest of our neighbors.

This is in great contrast to how the dominant worldview of our time tells us to live. Rather than resting secure in our future in the hands of our Loving Creator, we are told again and again how afraid we should be – afraid of those who don't look like us or worship like us, afraid that we haven't saved enough or invested well, afraid that we don't measure up to some unknown standard with what we wear and how we look and what we drive and a host of other trivial measurements. We are told we cannot love our enemies, cannot seek to find common ground with them lest they destroy us. Instead we must segregate ourselves from them and those who look like them, we must shoot on sight, we must use any means necessary to bring about their defeat. I ask you, is this trust in God? Is this the way of love, the way of Jesus? Jesus taught that we should indeed be as wise as the most subtle of God's creations but also as gentle as the quivering, cooing dove.

Like doves, sheep are gentle creatures. Like small children, they do not like strangers but they will unhesitatingly follow their shepherd anywhere he leads them. I know I have spoken in years past of the amazement of recent visitors to the Middle East who have witnessed sheep being herded as they have been since the time of Jesus. Several small herds are often brought together for nighttime safety in one large cote but in the morning they will quickly disentangle themselves and respond to the call of their own shepherd, even when several shepherds are calling to sheep at the same time. They recognize the voice of their shepherd, just as Jesus said. And, as I've also related before, they are not in the least comforted by the voice of a stranger. I'll never forget participating in the Living Nativity staged by First Baptist Church, Evansville, in our last December there. I was assigned to stand with a scene portraying the adoration of the Christ child by the shepherds, complete with sheep and other barn animals. At one point, the actual shepherd of the sheep left the scene for a few minutes, probably to get a warming drink (a church parking lot is a cold place in Evansville, Indiana in December). After a short time, the sheep began to stir nervously and then to bleat piteously. I attempted in my most mellifluous tones to soothe them but they were having none of it. And if I made any move to approach, they backed away against their secured tethers and showed the whites of their eyes. I don't know who was most relieved when their shepherd reappeared, me or the sheep.

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If we listen – truly listen – we, too, can distinguish the voice of the True Shepherd in our lives. It's not really that hard to recognize the false shepherds, the ones who come to steal and kill and destroy. They are the ones who frighten us, who make us back against our tethers. When we hear their voices and their words, our throats close up, our chests tighten, our mouths go dry. They stress us out and they do it purposely, so that in our perceived weakness and helplessness we will accept any shelter they offer, even if it is only a ramp leading to the slaughterhouse. In the hands of the master manipulators of this world, we become as lambs to the slaughter. We end up following them, becoming like them, because we have not listened carefully for the voice of the Shepherd.

My sisters and brothers, this must not be. We are not meant to become like the ones who steal, kill and destroy but like our Good Shepherd, Jesus the Christ, who teaches us to love and to heal and to build up. Jesus draws a clear contrast between himself and the false shepherds who would lead the flock astray for their own purposes: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus was not a warrior-king. He did not come with war horses but on a donkey. He carried not a sword but his own cross. In the only even remotely violent act attributed to him, he turned over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple and scattered the animals of the merchants using an improvised whip, an act which saved those animals from the slaughter for at least a day. He struck no blow against human or animal then or when he was arrested. On that night, when one of his disciples attempted to defend Jesus by attacking one of those sent to arrest him, Jesus rebuked him: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" The way of Jesus is not the way of violence, even under duress.

When we accept the proposition that violence is necessary, perhaps even desirable in some instances, we buy into what many theologians call "the myth of redemptive violence." Once this happens, we begin the slow descent into the spiral of violence and we fall further under the power of what Walter Wink calls "the Domination System" and what Brian McLaren calls "the Suicide System." It is the force that lies behind those who would steal and kill and destroy, the force of all that is opposed to our Loving Creator and to the Christ of God. This system, this culture, this power subtly promotes that myth of redemptive violence, the idea that only by taking up arms will we be safe, only by killing will we find life, only through war will we obtain peace. When presented baldly, these ideas sound absurd, something from George Orwell's dystopic novel, 1984, and not to be taken seriously. Of course, like the serpent, the false shepherds are among the most subtle of characters. That is why we need prophets like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to come along and remind us that "the ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy."

As we heard a few months ago in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us not to take violent revenge against an evildoer. We are to return good for evil, not evil for evil, because once we enter the descending spiral of violence, we quickly begin to resemble the very ones we fear and hate, the false shepherds, rather than imitating the Good Shepherd. Two great philosophers of the 19th and 20th Centuries understood this. Friedrich Nietzsche warned, "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster." Carl Jung wrote, "You always become the thing you fight the most," a warning picked up by my

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favorite band, U2, in their song, "Peace on Earth": "They say that what you mock / Will surely overtake you / And you become a monster / So the monster will not break you... And it's already gone too far / You say that if you go in hard / You won't get hurt..."

Another powerful illustration of this concept from modern artists is Brian DePalma's 1987 film, "The Untouchables," written by the great American playwright, David Mamet. The plot is familiar to most of us, either from the film or from the early 60s TV series starring Robert Stack as Elliot Ness. In the film, Kevin Costner plays Ness, an idealistic young federal agent assigned to break up the crime empire of Chicago boss Al Capone. In the Mamet/DePalma version, Ness begins by playing everything by the book. He is incorruptible, seemingly untouchable by the evil around him. But over the course of the movie, he begins to adopt more and more of Capone's violent methods. Perhaps the surest sign that Ness has taken the violence of his enemies into himself is when he snaps at the taunts of Capone's hit man, Frank Nitti, and throws the killer of his friend, now unarmed, off a roof to his death. No arrest, no trial, simply the vengeful, vigilante justice of the lynch mob... or the SEAL team. At the conclusion, Ness has brought Capone to justice and reflects upon the struggle. "I have foresworn myself," he says. "I have broken every law I swore to defend. I have become what I beheld, and I am content that I have done right." It is a chilling moment, for the filmmakers have led the audience to perceive the subtle changes in Ness as a betrayal of the ideals of the young family man portrayed at the beginning of the movie. Elliot Ness has accomplished his mission but in the process he has lost a part of his soul. He is not, as it turns out, untouchable.

But the fallen Elliot Ness is not our model. Our exemplar is Jesus, who, as I Peter reminds us, "suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps... When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." To resist evil but reject violence, as Jesus did, means we, too, must be prepared to suffer unjustly. We are not called to simply avoid violence by acquiescing to the violent. To be a Christian is not to be a coward. The disciples, who fled rather than stand with their teacher in his hour of need, were wrong. We must stand for those who are weaker than ourselves and against injustice. We must stand for the oppressed and against the oppressor. But we are to do this without the sword, without seeking revenge, without violence.

Am I suggesting we reject one absurdity, peace through violence, for another? Unequivocally not. Non-violent resistance works. We have seen it in this country in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. We have seen it in Egypt in recent days and earlier in the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, in the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia and in the Solidarity Movement in Poland. In his book, The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium, Walter Wink points out, "In 1989 alone, thirteen nations comprising 1.7 billion people – over thirty-two percent of humanity – experienced nonviolent revolutions. They succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations in every case but China... If we add all the countries touched by major nonviolent actions in (the 20th) century, the figure reaches almost 3 billion – a staggering sixty-four percent of humanity!"

Of course, nonviolent resistance does not always bear immediate fruit. Wink mentions China and we are seeing other examples today in Syria and other Middle Eastern lands. Some will

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remember that the Velvet Revolution in 1989 Czechoslovakia was only accomplished 21 years after the Prague Spring of 1968 was brutally repressed by the Soviets. The freedom that came to Hungary in the watershed year of 1989 had been even longer in the making. Before I was born, my mother worked for a Hungarian, Dr. Bogard in Festus, MO, who had fled his native land with his family after peaceful student protests in 1956 were violently suppressed by the Soviets. The last chapter has not yet been written in Syria or China or many other countries but I believe that those that are able to be faithful to nonviolent techniques of resistance will ultimately fare better than those who begin a new era with a reign of terror. The most recent edition of “Sojourners” magazine proclaims the key. The cover says, “The Surprising Power of Nonviolence – How Egyptian activists turned enemies into allies – and pulled off a revolution.” Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

“Isaiah ‘twas foretold it,” in his prophecy of the Suffering Servant of God: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” That “him” of whom Isaiah dreamed was Jesus, the gentle teacher from Nazareth who followed the will of his Father even unto death, the one of whom I Peter speaks, in echo of Isaiah: “For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” Our Good Shepherd leads us, has led us, will continue to lead us beside the still waters of shalom and walks beside us even through the valley of the shadow of death, protecting us and giving us abundant life even in the presence of our enemies. Do we now have the courage to follow our Christ, who loves us so, wherever he leads? Are we brave enough to allow him to fill our spirits with his love when the Domination System tells us we must hate? As we begin our fifty-first year of ministry in this place as those called Good Shepherd Baptist Church, can we prove ourselves to be disciples of the Good Shepherd in loving deed as well as in word? May the Shepherd of our souls grant us the wisdom and courage and compassion to truly love everybody just as our Father, who is perfect, loves us all. Amen.