

John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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 up again. I have received this command from my Father."

One Flock, One Shepherd - April 25, 2021

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Just a few days ago, many of us were holding our collective breath as the we were awaiting the verdict in the trial of former Officer Derek Chauvin, charged with the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Quite a few of us watched the trial unfold on live TV. Other followed the summaries on the nightly news. Almost nobody was unaware of what was going on.

For many, the prosecution presented an airtight, irrefutable case against Chauvin. From the testimony of eyewitnesses, to that of skilled medical doctors and professors, it seemed clear that Chauvin was guilty of using far more force than was necessary to restrain Floyd and contain him so he could be arrested and taken for arraignment.

But also for many onlookers there remained the fundamental question, would the jury vote to convict a police officer — a white police officer who was arresting a black man? Such a conviction would be an extremely rare event. Police officers are almost never convicted of any charges while on the job. White officers even more infrequently, and white officers apprehending black suspects almost never. Time and again white officers have been cleared of all charges even as many members of the public vehemently disagree.

This time, this particular time, the system worked and the jury voted unanimously to convict. In our justice system, verdicts must be unanimous to convict. If even one juror had a “reasonable doubt” there would be been a mistrial and the process would have started all over again.

The exceptional irony of all this is that the deliberations of the jury took place against the backdrop of the killing of another African-American man, Daunte Wright, shot instead of tazered for the crime of having air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror of his car. The day after, an African-American man was shot in North Carolina.

And the irony of the Derrick Chauvin verdict is compounded by the shooting death of a 16-year-old girl, Ma'Khia Bryant, in Columbus Ohio by a police officer just a few hours afterwards. Before the Chauvin trial started, a 13-year-old Afro-Hispanic boy was shot in Chicago. I can go on, but do I need to?

These deaths at the hands of men and women sworn to protect everybody equally are of course compounded by the daily reports we get of shootings and killings taking place right across the river in Philadelphia. Open warfare is breaking out. In just the past few weeks there have been mass killings in Georgia, Indiana, and Colorado. Any place, from street, to shopping center, to work can be a place where us, you and I, could easily be shot.

We live in a violent country. The gun-related death rate in the United States is easily 5 times as great as the next highest among high-income countries. Our nation has 120 guns for every 100 people, by far the highest in the world. Every year around 1500 Americans are shot by police, no nation even come close! We imprison more of our citizens than any other nation. Obviously jail time is not stopping the death.

Why am I reeling off these stories and numbers about death and shootings? Why? Because this is the church and the if the church cannot speak about the reality of our times, who will? The Old Testament is filled with the stories of prophets confronting the nation of Israel with the many injustices they were permitting. Jesus died because he dared speak and do the truth while calling out the hypocrisy of his age.

Today's scripture revolves around Jesus' familiar and comforting words that he is the Good Shepherd. He is the one who calls to us and when we follow, he will care for us. Jesus promises that his care is so deep that he is willing to lay down his life for us — and so he did.

Did you know that Jesus calling himself a “Good Shepherd” would have been considered an oxymoron? In his day, hardly any shepherds were considered good. Shepherding was one of the worst occupations people could do back then. It was dangerous, lonely, super hot in the summer and terribly cold in the winter. Shepherds were tasked with keeping the flock together and fighting off wolves and other predators who might harm the sheep.

The reality was that most shepherds would run away at the first sign of trouble and if a sheep wandered off, too bad for the sheep! By claiming to be a Good Shepherd, Jesus was telling us he was different. He cares for us, He loves us, He lays down his life for us, making for us the ultimate sacrifice.

Why? Because the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom to which we believers claim to belong, is different from the world. As our King, Jesus asks us to put others' welfare ahead of our own. He asks us to care about all people, not just our friends and families. He tells us that true love is all about seeing each other as children of God — every one of us is created to be a reflection of God. God is in you and the same God is in me. Therefore the question of life and living is not why should we help and care for each other, but how can we dare ignore the suffering and pain of each other.

But look at our country now. We live in a nation grounded in fear and suspicion of the other. Millions and millions of Americans firmly believe that immigrants represent a threat to our existence and way of life. You may have heard of a concept called “Replacement Theory” which is becoming increasingly popular among certain white people. “Replacement Theory” is the idea that the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant world which dominated the United States is gradually being diluted or replaced by immigrants and others holding supposedly radically different goals and values than

white people. They argue that the United States is on the verge of collapse owing to the increasing numbers of “different” people “invading” our country. Their solution: identify, stigmatize, and expel any person who is “different” for any reason and do their best to exclude them from White Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. According to Replacement Theory, all of them, all of them, are enemies.

My friends, such is their false reality. Now the real reality is that by 2050, there will be no racial/ethnic group that comprises over half our population. The United States will be a nation of minorities. We who live in New Jersey, especially north Jersey, are well aware of that fact already. New Jersey is the most diverse state in the country. I’m a WASP and I don’t feel particularly threatened by the diversity surrounding me literally wherever I go. In fact, I feel strengthened by it.

But many, many Americans do feel threatened by the growing diversity in our nation. And all I can say is that Jesus Christ says they are wrong.

When Jesus spoke of being a Good Shepherd, a surprising, almost ridiculous self-description, he made one more claim: as the Good Shepherd, he would care for one flock, one wholly and beautifully united flock.

Jesus said, “I 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.” Over the centuries, people have struggled with this passage. What did he mean about sheep that do not belong to this fold? Who didn’t belong? Nevertheless, Jesus said the sheep that didn’t belong he would welcome and they would listen.

Why is it that we humans seem almost hard-wired to separate ourselves from each other? Why are the distinctions we make so important and so necessary? I suppose that thousands of years ago, people would group themselves by family, clan, and tribe. They shared similar body features, dress, and customs. They could tell who was part of the tribe based on appearance. Those who did not look, sound, or act like them were strangers were automatically suspect. Of course as the population got bigger and people from dissimilar groups increasingly interacted it must have become more difficult to decide who was acceptable, and who was not. Nonetheless, we humans are continually inventing new ways to decide who is in and who is out. There has to be an “us” and there has to be a “them.” Moreover, whenever “we” have the power, “we” will do our best to make ourselves superior to “them” whatever it takes.

And when “we” are threatened by “them” we naturally claim the right to subdue, hurt, or destroy “them” however we wish.

Thus the problem. For centuries, White Anglo-Saxon Males, like myself, have been defining ourselves as the “we” — the “us” of this country. “We” controlled everything, government, business,

religion, you name it. But over time, “we” have been diluted. Slaves were freed. They could vote. They could go to school. Then women could vote. Then Asians could immigrate. Then same-sex couples could marry. Then more Latinx people could come.

And every one of these developments was met and is still being met with resistance, fear, and hatred. Throw easy access to firearms into the mix, give police officers almost unlimited power to do what they wanted and is the killing of George Floyd and the thousands like him truly surprising?

Given all these changes, is it surprising that transgendered people are the last group some state legislators are trying to legally marginalize? So much hatred directed at so few people!

When Jesus first spoke the words that he would be the One Shepherd for One Flock, he was certainly referring to the need for Jews, of whom he was one, to welcome and accept non-Jews into the fellowship of believers. Jesus himself demonstrated that by welcoming and ministering to the Roman enemy, diseased lepers, foreign women, the blind, lame, and sick. In short all the people rejected and still rejected by society.

Friends, the challenge to us as Christians is clear. Within hours of Derek Chauvin’s conviction, three more incidents similar to what he did to George Floyd happened. They are happening every day. And the awful truth is they will continue to happen: despite the guns and despite the jails.

Jesus calls us to attack this madness at the very core: We must love one another. We must welcome one another. We must accept one another. We must support and strengthen one another.

Jesus charges us to stop differentiating ourselves from each other for any of the myriad of reasons we keep inventing to perpetuate the hatred and separation that is woven into the fabric of America. These ideas are literally destroying us. They are preventing us, all of us, from being the best humans we can be, the ones God made us to be. When I am prevented from interacting with my fellow human beings because they are different from me, we all lose.

Our mission, as individuals, as a church, as a community, is to deliberately work to expose the absurd and artificial divisions among us and strive to eliminate the pointless fear and hatred they have generated so we can truly be one flock with one shepherd our One Lord Jesus Christ.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.