

In the name of Jesus the Good Shepherd, Amen.

There was a shepherd tending his sheep at the edge of a country road. A brand new Lincoln Navigator screeched to a halt next to him. The driver, a young man dressed in an Armani suit, Ferragamo shoes, TAG Heuer glasses, Cartier wrist watch and a Brioni tie got out and asked the shepherd: “If I guess how many sheep you have, will you give me one of them?”

The shepherd looked at the young man, then looked out across the sprawling field of sheep and said: “Yeah, sure.”

The young man parked the SUV, connected his notebook and 3G wireless modem; entered a NASA uplink, scanned the ground using their satellite photos, opened a database filled with Excel tables and algorithms, then printed a report on his mini printer. He turned to the shepherd and said: “You have exactly 1,586 sheep here.”

The shepherd answered: “That’s right. You can have the sheep of your choice.”

The young man picked up one of the animals and put it in the back of his vehicle.

The shepherd looked at him and said: “Now, if I guess your profession, will you pay me back in kind?”

The young man answered: “Sure.”

The shepherd said: “You are a consultant.”

“How did you know that?” asked the young man.

Simple, said the shepherd. “First, you came here without being asked. Second, you charged me a fee to tell me something I already knew. Third, you do not understand anything about my business. Now I’d really like to have my dog back.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday. The reason it is called that can pretty easily be seen from the lectionary readings. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus explains what it means when He says that He is the Good Shepherd. And today we get the beautiful – nearly universally known – 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the psalm of the good shepherd. Shepherds and sheep, hired hands and wolves – all very meaningful to Jesus' audience, but maybe not so much today.

When we think of shepherds, especially the Good Shepherd, we know what that looks like. In our mind's eye we see the paintings and stained glass with rolling green hills and blue skies – or better yet, breathtaking sunsets. In the background are fat, contented sheep with snow white wool, lazily grazing or lying quietly in the grass. In the foreground is Jesus – with spotless white robes on, staff in His hand, and that implacable smile on His face that gives the combination message of, “be still and know that I am God,” and “I'm your best friend forever.” The setting we see when we think of the Good Shepherd is perfect – and perfectly idealized. You see behind all of that idyllic beauty is an ugly, even sinister undertone. And we do this section of the Gospel an injustice if we see the beauty without the other message – that the Good Shepherd would, and DID die for the sake of the sheep.

Jesus died – as He put it – for “the least of these. Not for those who had power and prestige and held forth on grand stages, but rather for those who were looked down upon

and hated by society. These were the sheep that He would leave the rest of the flock to rescue. And they were the ones He wanted the disciples to pay particular attention to.

Oskar Schindler lived out Jesus' teaching on the Good Shepherd, whether he knew it or not. In the film, *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg tells the true story of a man who began a career as a war profiteer. He curried favor with the Nazi party so that he could get government contracts and so that the Nazis would supply him with slave labor from the Ghetto in Krakow, where the Jews are forced to live. Over time, the film shows a transformation in Schindler. As the treatment of the Jews got worse and worse, his empathy for their plight, and ultimately his love of them as people, grew more and more. Until finally, as the last of the Jews in Poland were beginning to be shipped out to the death camps in Buchenwald and Auschwitz, Schindler spent every penny of the fortune he had amassed, *buying* men, women and children and keeping them safe in the plant he owned. At the close of the war, Schindler told his group of survivors that they were free, and he bitterly mourned the fact that he could not save more of them.

Similarly, in 2004, the film *Hotel Rwanda* was released. Again a true story of a war-torn nation, *Hotel Rwanda* tells the story of Paul Rusesabagina's attempt to save his family, and what that effort became. In 1994, the Hutus – an ethnic majority in the country of Rwanda – staged a coup, taking over the government from the ruling Tutsis – the ethnic minority group. As the state run radio station blared messages 24 hours a day, calling the Tutsis “cockroaches,” and inciting the Hutu people to exterminate them all,

Paul Rusesabagina was faced with a dilemma. He was Hutu, but his wife, Tatiana was Tutsi. As Paul saw more and more of his neighbors being dragged from their homes, beaten and killed, he had to do something for his family and friends. Paul bribed soldiers to allow him to take his small group to the 5 star hotel where he was a manager. Because the hotel was owned by Belgian nationals, it became a safe haven (at least relatively safe). And Paul began to accept more and more Tutsi refugees from more and more aid organizations. Paul Rusesabagina risked his life on innumerable occasions, not just for his wife and her family, but for *all* of the Tutsis who were facing genocide.

The author of the 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle of John says, in this morning's reading,

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action”

Paul Rusesabagina and Oskar Schindler are dramatic examples of people who have “laid down their lives,” on behalf of the sheep Jesus talked about. Neither of these men actually died for what they did, but each was willing to do so – which is just as big a commitment. But does it stop there? Must we all prove that we would willingly die for other people in order to follow Jesus? Fortunately, most of us are not called to go that far.

But all of the genocides in history have had things in common. One of the biggest commonalities is that first people must see other people as less than human, then they can

be convinced that treating them as less than human is acceptable – or even desirable. In Nazi Germany there was a propaganda machine that constantly bombarded German citizens with messages of the evils of Judaism and the belief that Jews were less human than the Aryan majority. Similarly in Rwanda, where the Hutu people were constantly bombarded with messages telling them that Tutsis were vermin, bugs who should be killed before they turned on the majority and killed the Hutus. Fear and hatred are powerful political tools.

It is the insidious messages of hate that always precede violence against a group. If we listen to and internalize messages that tell us that other people are “less than” we are; that they are so far beneath us that they surpass undesirability and reach the level of intolerability that allow people to contemplate the need to “get rid” of all such people.

I know that there is no one in this congregation who has ever given thought to exterminating a group of people because they were not like you. But I also know that everyone is occasionally guilty of treating people badly, thinking unkindly of people, saying things about them that show we believe people who are different than we are, of being inferior to us. And that root issue is exactly what Jesus was getting at.

If you believe that someone else is not as good as you because of their skin color, their ethnic makeup, the country in which they were born, their religious beliefs, the way they live their lives, or their sexual identity, you run the very real risk of beginning to see them as sub-human, as not being worthy of the same love that is shown to you.

Our baptismal covenant frames the issue this way, the congregation is asked, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” And the response is, “I will, with God's help.” Then comes the central question. “Will you strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being?”

And the people respond, “I will, with God’s help.” “So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Amen.