

REFLECTION

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John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

How do you tell an important story—one that exposes a truth that desperately needs to be acknowledged? How do you tell such a story with the hope that some truth-telling will lead to a common understanding, some forgiveness, and even some healing? When you have a story like this to tell, you go ahead and tell it, at whatever cost, because you love people enough to take the risk. A true story about the messiness and painfulness of human relationships is the hardest sort of story there is. You don't go about it lightly. You pray about it. You struggle with it. You suffer with it. I've gleaned these words from George C Wolfe, the playwright and director of theater and film. He says,

You proportion the story. Sometimes it is so difficult that you have to create another story that can tell the larger story for you. So you create a parable—a story that is proportioned so that yesterday's painful truth can empower rather than overwhelm.

I've never heard this definition of a parable before.

A parable is a story that is proportioned so that yesterday's painful truth can empower rather than overwhelm.

This is what the *Parable of the Good Shepherd* is all about. There were specific cruelties in first century Palestine—real stories about injustice, poverty, the abuse of authority, the corruption of leadership, and suffering inflicted to intimidate and eradicate. The Good Shepherd is a proportioned story—to empower those who heard it. The Good Shepherd is the alternative. The Good Shepherd is the solution to the damage. The Good Shepherd knows better, understands better, is an advocate, and truly loves and cares. Like David, (Remember the shepherd boy, later the King?) the Good Shepherd has the power with only a few stones and a slingshot to

overpower the evil that surrounds. The Good Shepherd's love is not self-serving, but is a *laying-down-life-for-others* kind of love.

The story of the Good Shepherd is perhaps the most important story for the followers of Jesus and for the Church today. It is a story that is proportioned so that *yesterday's painful truth can empower rather than overwhelm*. It is a story about yesterday and today and tomorrow. Unlike first century Palestine, today's painful truths are sometimes caught on camera. Every day, more and more videos taken with cellphones or security cameras are changing the way we see and understand. Here are some headlines from yesterday morning:

Caught on camera: Woman steals kitten from Carol City Home.

Lubbock home intruders caught on camera.

Purse thief caught on camera at nightclub in Delray Beach.

There is even a tv series in England called, "Criminals Caught on Camera," that features footage of actual crimes caught on closed-circuit tv, now in its fifth season. And, of course, the trial of Officer Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd— Would there even be a trial without the video taken by 17-year-old Darnella Frazier? And the self-incriminating videos taken on January 6—There it is. What sort of parable do we need— so that *yesterday's painful truth can empower rather than overwhelm*.

There is something that can't be caught on camera that has caught my attention. What you don't see in the newspapers or television is worse and more far reaching than what the cameras catch of single incidents. What isn't caught on camera is something that is being called, "Intolerance Fatigue." The term may be new, but the concept isn't. Scholars studying the history of social justice movements, identify the underlying condition that relentlessly plagues black Americans—and other minority groups. Although protesters gather to demand equality and justice, what the camera doesn't see is the relentlessness and weariness experienced by Black Americans, Asian Americans, Jewish Americans, Muslim Americans, Native Americans—that debilitates and

threatens to kill the soul. “*I’m tired,*” writes our own Bishop Eugene Sutton in a Pastoral Letter a few days ago. He continues,

I’m weary of the lies, self-deception and blindness of how life really is for the “least, the last and the left-out” in America. ...I’m 67 years old and the weariness of still having to convince too many of my white brothers and sisters that we have a real problem here with implicit bias and blindness to their own white privilege just gets to me sometimes.

Bishop Sutton is the first African American bishop of Maryland—a 300-year old diocese established in Colonial America.

Intolerance Fatigue. It’s not about isolated incidents. It’s about the pervasive condition and relentless daily threats and fears that can shut down who you are. I remember a recurring nightmare I had during a period of my life that was exceptionally difficult.

I was standing in the front yard of my house. Canon balls kept coming over the roof top and hitting near where I stood. I could see them coming. It was easy for me to move out of the way. Individual cannonballs weren’t the problem. But they kept coming and coming. And I knew that eventually I would be too tired to move and I would inevitably be struck.

Living with constant fear and frustration can’t be caught on camera but explains so much about the debilitating condition and its power to undermine and destroy people. Dr. Howard Thurman made this observation:

The socially disadvantaged [person] is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: “Who am I? What am I?”

The first question has to do with a basic self-estimate, a profound sense of belonging, of counting. (In today’s terms, of mattering.) If a [person] feels that he/she does not belong in the way in which it is perfectly normal for other people to belong, then he/she develops a deep sense of insecurity....at the same time to be

dogged by a sense of social inferiority. [But— Thurman continues)... the awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the [person] and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power. I have seen it happen again and again.

Dr. Thurman wrote this in 1947.

Enter the Good Shepherd. You know what else cannot be caught on camera but has the power to revive, give courage, fearlessness and power? The Good Shepherd and a *Laying-Down-Life Kind of Love*. I don't mean the kind of love we often think about—emotional love, feelings, and sweet words or a kiss. Cameras catch this sort of love in movies—which are really just scripts and actors. I mean the kind of love that if it is to be real becomes tangible over time in truth and in action. The kind of love that if it is to be real is offered for the sake of others, over and over again. It is personal. It is specific. It changes lives. God's love for humanity, all of humanity, became tangible in the life of Jesus. "We know love by this," writes John, "That he laid down his life for us." It is deliberate. It is not an easy kind of love. It doesn't just happen once. When we say that Jesus gave his life that he might take it up again, we are saying that it was his choice. If Jesus was a victim at all he was a victim of his own *all-consuming divine love*.

The *Laying-Down-Life-Kind-of-Love*. It may be the only solution to our fatigue and hopelessness. In it we are all known by name—we matter. Where we've been, who we are, what has happened—it all matters. And not in spite of these things, but because of these things, we are loved and cherished and given the highest status and worth —We are Child of God.

The Good Shepherd is not only a parable about Jesus but is who we are to be as the Church. As we have been loved—with a *laying-down-life-kind of love*, so we are to love others. *Laying-down-life kind of love* is resurrection love. Resurrection can't be caught on camera but it is the underlying condition—the gift of freedom—the breathe of life—the tangible, real kind of love that changes us, transforms us—and transforms the lives of others through us.

AMEN.