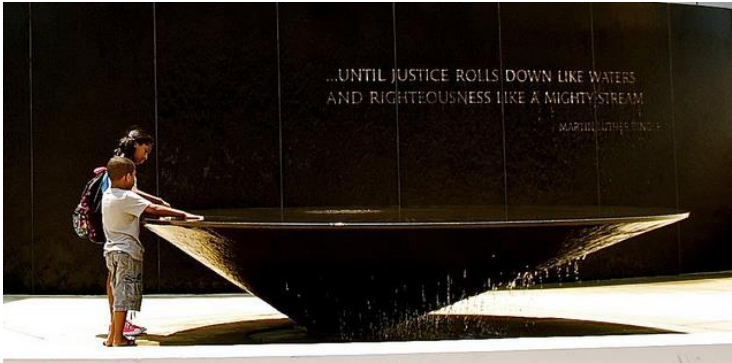


# “ALL THE SHEEP OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD”

Jeremiah 9:23-24, Micah 6:8, John 10:11-16

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Tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and today is therefore the day designated by the Presbyterian Church as “Race Relations Sunday.” I believe this is an important observance for us all and especially for us in majority-white churches. It’s important because if Christians will not lead the way in seeking reconciliation and repenting of racism, who will? And if we won’t, how does our proclamation of the gospel’s power to heal and reconcile have any integrity or meaning? And if we aren’t willing to come to grips with the reality of racism, how can we pretend to believe Jesus when he says “The truth will make you free”? I believe the biblical call to justice speaks with abundant clarity to this issue. I also believe that the theological understanding of sin we have in the reformed tradition particularly equips and calls us to address racism, which many have called America’s “original sin.”

Now, in reformed theology, when we talk about “original sin,” we are talking about a state we find ourselves in as human beings regardless of our own choosing. It’s something that surrounds us from the moment we are born; we are enmeshed in it, shaped by it, inescapably broken by it. And that’s very much the way it is with racism in our society. To call racism America’s “original sin” is to understand that though we didn’t choose it or create it and may not approve of it and sometimes might not even recognize it, we are enmeshed in it. It’s shaped our perspective. We may benefit from it. It is a kind of brokenness we can’t separate ourselves from entirely, even when we want to. We inhabit it and it inhabits us.

Racism is more than any individual prejudices, stereotypes, or even hatred we harbor; more than particular actions or words or efforts to exclude. It’s both larger and more subtle: it’s systems and structures that perpetuate inequality, and it’s a whole host of unconscious or barely conscious assumptions.

Even the way we talk about this in the church betrays those assumptions: We name a “race relations Sunday” and express a hope for “racial reconciliation”- a major theme in our denomination’s “Confession of 1967,” for example. But those expressions seem to suggest that we all just need to try harder to get along. And that suggestion misrepresents the reality of racism, which goes far beyond disagreements or lack of understanding or cultural differences. Because the harm of racism doesn’t fall equally on everyone. And so the burden of responsibility for ending it doesn’t belong equally to all. To put it more bluntly, *white people* need to fight racism and we need to beware of making people of color responsible for it. To

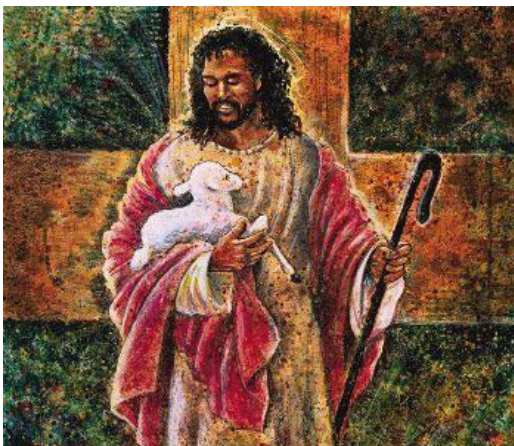
that end, we have to increase our awareness of the many ways privilege (or lack of it) shapes our lives and our opportunities and our outlook... big and little ways, blatant and subtle ways. Here's just a very little example:



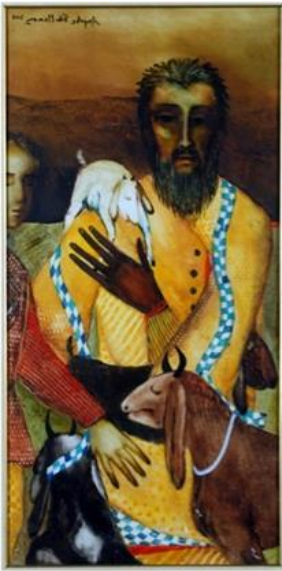
*(The Good Shepherd by Bernhard Plockhost)*

Jesus the good Shepherd. (You knew I was going to get around to it eventually, right?!) Probably every one of us is familiar with this image or a similar one, illustrating, not a scene from Jesus' life, but his own metaphor of self-description. It's maybe not the greatest art – it's kinda sentimental – but it's an image beloved by many. And it's very definitely a white Jesus. I'm not saying that makes it wrong (and before we get into the question of historical accuracy – that's mostly beside the point here). But most of us probably grew up with pictures like this one, and never thought a thing about it. We didn't have to say to ourselves that of course it doesn't matter that Jesus doesn't look like us or try to imagine a picture in which he does. For millions and millions of people, this is the normative picture of Jesus. And that is a tiny, tiny example of white privilege in the Christian church.

Thankfully for all of us, in recent years, we have been blessed with access to art that broadens our vision and allows us to see Jesus through other eyes:



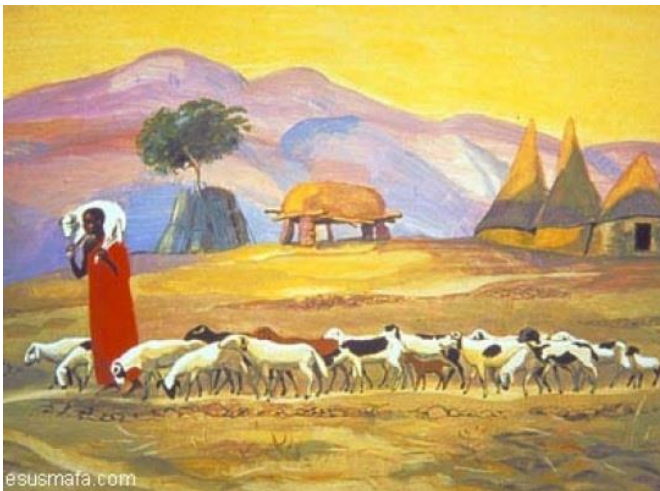
*(He Walks With Me by Lester Kern)*



(*The Good Shepherd* by Anjoli Ela Menon, India)



(*Jesus the Good Shepherd*, photography by David Sanger)



(*The Good Shepherd*; [jesusmafa.com](http://jesusmafa.com))

The passage from John's gospel that inspires these images has still more to offer us though.

Somehow although most of us have little firsthand experience of sheep or shepherding, this metaphor seems to speak powerfully about life and faith and our relationship with Jesus. It incorporates the sense we have that life is a journey – with ups and downs, adventures and dangers and challenges. It lets us see how Jesus walks that journey with us. It emphasizes the guidance he gives. It's a beautiful, rich image and Jesus must have known how comforting his disciples would find it through the years. But ... but ... the flip side of that comforting metaphor is that we are the sheep in the picture!

When we were preparing the star gifts for last Sunday, Jerry and I were joking about the gifts that nobody really wants to get, like "discipline" and "servanthood" and, of course, "humility." But humility is absolutely integral to embracing Jesus as our good Shepherd. We have to have humility to recognize how much of the journey is not in our control and how deeply we need both guidance and comfort. And humility is a key point at which this scripture intersects with our responsibility in the face of racism. We must find the humility to name this sin, and to acknowledge our enmeshment in it. To let go of defensiveness. To become aware of privilege. To listen to the voices of people of color. To admit how much we don't know. To take the time to learn. To ask how we can change and what we can do. This is not easy. It may be not unlike a journey to a new place. But we are not without guidance and help. The prophet Micah writes, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Jesus walks with us in every journey toward justice and kindness.

He says "I am the good Shepherd." But he says more than that. He also says "I have other sheep who are not of this fold." He's trying to tell his disciples that his flock – his followers – will include people whom they don't consider part of "their" community, in other words, non-Jews. Not only that, he says, those other sheep are not a *separate* flock. There is just one flock. One Shepherd. The good Shepherd is the shepherd of *all* the sheep.

Our context is somewhat different, but the wider applicability of Jesus' words isn't hard to discern once you grasp his point: Jesus' flock – those he loves and calls – includes people we see as different or other, those we regard as "outsiders," those we've excluded, from whom we let ourselves be separated by barriers of prejudice and privilege, those whose oppression we have accepted, those whose dignity we have denied or whose cultures we have spurned, those from whose suffering we have benefitted. We in the church, who call ourselves Jesus' flock, have a long history of failing to hear his voice on this, and we have a lot to repent of and to repair.

To not own the continued existence of racism as sin is to compound the sin with denial and disregard for the truth. To acquiesce to it, to let it go on without doing what we can to shed light on it and take it apart is a sin against God, against the body of Christ, and against the human family.

Can we doubt that racism breaks the heart of our good Shepherd, who knows and loves all his sheep?



(*Good Shepherd* by Daniel Bonnell)

I think I won't look at an image of Jesus the good Shepherd in the same way again. I never realized before that "I am the good Shepherd" is a challenging as well as a comforting message. But of course it is, because when we make up our minds to follow Jesus, we are following and learning to be like a good Shepherd, whose love and care, whose gifts and call are for *all* the sheep.

**Resources:**

*Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community* (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) churchwide antiracism policy, 2016) and *Facing Racism Study Guide*.