

Talk about a lot of ugly news that has hit those of us in the west, and especially us Christians, in recent weeks. I am talking first about two fairly widely reported massacres of Christians by followers of ISIS or ISIL or “Islamic State,” whichever name you prefer.

About the time of the one of those mass incidents, the killing of about twenty Egyptian Coptic Christians on a beach in Libya, TV personality Bill O’Reilly, who no matter your politics is an engaging fellow whose Catholic faith has much to do with his attitudes, called on what he labeled “Christian leaders” to speak out against Muslim extremism; I did not do so because, even if I were to consider myself a “Christian leader,” heck, I guess I sort of do aspire to that, I am not sure what “Christian leaders” should say about Islamic extremism, especially when there are those claiming Christianity who I believe do ill to *our* faith.

I was, however, upset that the President did not recognize that horrific act for what in light of further such events it clearly was and is: *genocide*, an attempt to kill and even exterminate a people not for what they do, but for who and what they are. And the kind of a statement, “Mr. President, this is genocide against Christians,” is the kind of *moral* statement that it is appropriate for Christian leaders to make.

Let there be no mistake as to what I am saying: I am reluctantly disagreeing with the careful calculation the President must make in keeping as allies in the fight against Islamic extremism nations of the world that are fairly extreme in their own versions of Islam, such as Saudi Arabia, as well as not giving ammunition to those Islamists who will claim to others that the US is waging holy war against them. I most certainly am not accusing the President of being a closet Muslim. But I am accusing the President of being sheepish as Christian lambs are led to the slaughter.

Lambs to the slaughter, lambs to their death. These ideas bring to mind the images of Jesus as the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” — a play on the idea in Leviticus of the scape goat and the sheep offered as a sacrifice in the Temple. But it also raises the image of we as the sheep and Jesus as “the Good Shepherd” in today’s Gospel reading, or the Hebrew Bible’s comparison of us as sheep and God as the shepherd in the beautiful twenty-third Psalm.

These uses of “lamb” and “sheep” and “shepherd” are, of course, *imagery*, *metaphors* to make the relationship between us and God and Jesus *understandable*. But I think the use of this *imagery* goes beyond that, that in that imagery of Jesus as the shepherd, in particular, is a teaching of how we are to be and behave. WWJD; “what would Jesus do?” When I first heard that I thought of an old Chicago radio station that was the first Top-40 station I knew during the 1950’s, WJJD, but while “WWJD” became a bit of a cliché, it is what we should indeed ask ourselves: What Would Jesus Do if faced with what we as Christians living safely away from such terrorism see?

One thing I believe I can say with certainty is that Jesus would not remain silent! The Good Shepherd rounds up his sheep and protects them; he does not look the other way while wolves pounce on his lambs.

There is an interesting distinction Jesus draws in our Gospel reading between the shepherd who owns the sheep and the hired hand. The hired hand is somewhat indifferent because he has no real stake in the well-being of the sheep, while the owner has a real interest! And I think one thing being said is that we, you and I, have an interest in, not an indifference toward, other human beings — and most definitely toward our fellow Christians wherever they may be.

But what can we do? It is the sophist who caustically accuses one of being a war-monger who calls for action by force against evil in the world, but who will not fight himself. I am not sure I am calling for force, though I do not have a sound alternative, and force alone may protect people against an ISIS, nor am I sure that I would not fight myself to protect these persecuted Christians, if there were a way to do so. I am not, at any rate, saying we Christians necessarily demand that the President send the Army or Marines to Africa.

*What I am saying* is that the President needs to be a vocal, very vocal, voice identifying genocide as genocide and demanding that nations protect Christians and Jews and other religious groups, and indicating without hesitation that no nation that fails to do so can do business with the United States of America.

What? Do without Saudi oil? Let gasoline prices rise? Considering the cost being paid by Christians being persecuted, if it costs a few cents a gallon to try to help them, so be it!

But now that my ranting is over, turning for the most part away from world news, what about us? Especially we who are north of sixty — years, that is — and living in a stable way in Arizona at least part of the year? Is there a further message for us in the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd?

To me, it is that we not be satisfied with being sheep led into the sheepfold — has anyone ever used the expression, *sheepfold*? and do we really know what one looks like? To me, it is that we not be satisfied with being sheep led into the sheepfold but rather *that we emulate the shepherd!*

I am for now departing completely from any talk of belligerence concerning Islamic extremists to talk about our roles as members of Christ's Church, looking for answers to "What Would Jesus Do?" in today's world; how would Jesus deal with the sheep? I do not believe he would take up arms, quite literally, but you and I do have to build Christ's Church as a force for good and against evil in the world as much as the way to the one who can bring human joy.

And we do not necessarily have to join the ranks of people such as Warren Weinstein and Giovanni Lo Porto to do so.

Warren Weinstein and Giovanni Lo Porto? They were the two hostages taken by Al Qaeda who were killed in January in an American drone strike. They were not religious workers, but they were individuals working on behalf of others.

Working on behalf of others; “the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”

“The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep,” and yet how often do we feel put upon when something simple about our church-going practices changes? How many of us are willing to get up earlier on Sunday should the time of worship change, to sing an unfamiliar hymn that may resonate with younger people, or maybe on occasion to worship in another church eight miles away?

When you receive this coming month’s newsletter — there are some copies here and it is posted on our website — you will see that your Session and I have made a proposal for summer worship that would call for Christians from each of four congregations to make some efforts during the summer to accommodate the idea that we are, as we sang last week, “One in the Spirit, one in the Lord.” It is an attempt, and I want to emphasize this, an attempt *to build a stronger body of Christ and to amplify its role in these communities and in the world!* In one very real sense what we are proposing is part of an attempt to prolong the lives, the survival, of four small churches so that they can emerge as one church that can act as a shepherd bringing people into Christ’s sheepfold rather than to remain as sheep standing inside with indifference to what is happening outside.

Putting this another way, we are not called to act like sheep other than in the sense that we should follow the Good Shepherd; we are called not to be sheep, but to be Shepherd’s Aides.

I am tired — not physically tired, emotionally exhausted — tired from looking at statistics that are denied by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Methodist Church and other mainline Protestant denominations that show we are irrelevant! I want to ask, how can we even dare to call ourselves Christians when we spend out time on insignificant items of business, refuse to change anything about ourselves in order to reach out and draw in others, effectively, denouncing what Jesus calls us to do through the Great Commission — “Go forth and make disciples of all nations” — when at the same time we are concerned about what hymns we sing people are being killed because they have the courage to refuse to denounce their faith?

Those people who refuse to denounce their faith may be like lambs led to the slaughter, but their heads are high, they are proud of their faith, and *they* put loyalty to Christ above keeping their lives in the face of terror. Are any of us willing to put our faith *above inconvenience*? Are any of us willing to leave our zones of comfort to reverse the tides that are making church-going Christians a vanishing breed even in lands where there is no ISIL?

The preacher asks, not altogether sheepishly.