

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It was hilly land, full of weeds, not good for much, so we bought sheep. The good land, fertile land was reserved for growing crops of corn and wheat and soybeans. But where the land could not be farmed we put up fences for the sheep.

I found there wasn't much to like about the sheep until they got to my dinner plate. Their wool would become matted with burrs and manure. For some weeks while they were lambs they were young and alive and frolicked, but soon they were more sheep than lamb, no more running and jumping, just slow stubbornness. But one thing I did like about the sheep, I could handle them. If it came down to a battle of wills between me and a sheep, I always won. A cow or a horse or even a pig might present some danger, but a sheep I could push around. They don't bite; I doubt that sheep have ever trampled a person to death. Sheep are safe.

Like us.

Sheep.

Why that crowd took up stones and threw them at Stephen until his prayers were silenced by death. And none of the sheep tried to stop them. Think about it -there were thousands of Christians in Jerusalem that day when Stephen preached his sermon that incited the crowd. There must have been other Christians with him there. What did they do? When persecutions began with this stoning death of Stephen we read they scattered, like sheep running from wolves - defenseless.

Or think about the second lesson: The words we read earlier are immediately preceded by this sentence: “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.”

Be like sheep. All those who owned slaves must have loved this advice: “For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you do right and suffer for it you have God's approval.”

Slaves, don't defend yourselves, don't become angry, just take whatever they give to you - sheep.

And aren't we sheep also. The powerful use the church of Jesus Christ to keep people in line while they increase their wealth time and time again and there is barely a “baa” coming from us. We just dream of some green pastures and still waters and wait.

Sheep.

I'm tired of it. I want to be the guy with some power. I want some fangs to bite with, some claws that will tear at injustice. I want to lead the people in some other way than through the gate who is the crucified one. For the slaves were reminded that the crucified one, Jesus, “was abused and he did not return abuse: he suffered and he did not threaten; but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”

He is the gate through which we enter - not the gate of some mighty warrior with sword and shield, not the gate of some planner and plotter who is more conniving than any enemy, but Jesus the crucified one who simply trusted in God.

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly,” Jesus said. And Stephen did. And slaves who bore abuse did. And now it is our turn.

I wish there were some way to make this all glowingly attractive. Maybe we could paint the cross in gold, put a shiny crown on it. But when Stephen died it was because stones crushed his skull, and broke his bones, and he bled and it was awful. Yet Luke tells us that through it all he loved. Not just God, not just his fellow believers, but the very people who rained stones on him. He loved them.

Anyone can be a sheep, pushed and shoved and treated with contempt. It takes no faith to let others walk all over us, just spinelessness. But to love and forgive those who hurt us takes the grace of God. We must come through the gate who is Jesus for such love to be born in our hearts.

“I am the gate,” says Jesus. “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

You are sheep of the shepherd who loves his enemies, and prays for those who persecute him. He calls you by name, by his own name that you might love as he does.

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