

*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

At least we're not the only ones; the first disciples didn't get him either.

The image of the shepherd and the sheep is a fitting one for all of us disciples, assuming that sheep don't bleat the shepherd's language.

*The sheep follow him because they know his voice*, and not because they are processing the information and concluding that it jives with their own careful research or opinion.

For his first disciples, Jesus' mumbo-jumbo may as well be in English instead of the Greek that everyone else speaks, because what the sheep hear sounds like an adult on the phone in a Peanuts cartoon: *wah wah wah wah...*

They have no idea what the voice is saying, but because it is *that* voice, attached to that shepherd who loves and feeds them so reliably, they go along with him, whatever it is he might be saying.

That, of course, is the daring trust we name faith, a difficult proposition for us disciples now to embrace.

We're urban and savvy and smart.

We speak the language and we decide things for ourselves.

We weigh our options, calculate our risks, and work hard to control our own destinies.

We're happy to listen to Jesus, in case he has something to say that we might find valuable, but not without critical consideration and reserving the right to dismiss whatever we don't like.

This particular passage today doesn't add up.

Is Jesus the shepherd or is he the gate?

Is he the voice we follow or the threshold between danger and safe pasture?

*Tell us plainly*, say those who are listening to him speak later in this chapter, which is our demanding prayer as well, though of course, be careful what you ask for.

We feel not just the want but the need to understand.

Show us the map before we go.

Tell us the plan so we can decide whether to go along with it.

Give us an outline to follow, with clear and orderly details, so we know what to expect.

But instead we get one fuzzy figure of speech followed by another which doesn't quite match it, nearly the same color but a clashing pattern, like two separate paintings hung side by side on a wall rather than point B following point A.

We have Jesus the shepherd next to Jesus the gate, and the two separate images don't really combine, except that the gospel writer seems to think they do.

So let's humor the ancient author and try it.

Jesus is the shepherd and the gate.

Jesus is a doorway with a voice.

Picture if you will the doors to this sanctuary, that wooden boundary between the room in here and the world out there, the doors you have to fight with the pastor to keep closed in the middle of winter, or as we call it in Chicago, May.

The pastor likes them open, because that's who Jesus is, inviting and welcoming people in, calling sheep into green pasture and still waters, into a sanctuary of rest and renewal, into a safe enclosure different than the dangerous and demanding world.

Those doors look so heavy and imposing when closed, like twin bouncers at an exclusive club, when they should speak with a voice that beckons tired sheep inside, that summons us to restorative sabbath, to an overflowing table of blessing and grace.

This is a rare and desperate necessity in a world steamrolled by what Wayne Muller names "the theology of progress."

Muller laments:

*Only when we get to the end can we lie down in green pastures, be led beside still waters, and allow our soul to be restored.*

*This is the psalm we sing when people have died.*

*This is the psalm we save for death, because in the world of progress, you do not rest in green pastures, you do not lie beside still waters, there is no time.*

*Never in this life, only in the next.* (Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath*. New York: Bantam, 1999, p. 79.)

Such busyness, of course, also infects our own community, and I'm as guilty as anyone.

A handful of honest parishioners have admitted to me that they have stopped coming for stretches at a time because they were tired of being asked to do things, tired of being robbed of their pasture by bandits from the inside, well-meaning but restless voices that really do need new committee members or worship servers but eventually sour into a nagging chorus of complainers that too many people don't do enough around here, like Mary wasting her time and doubling her poor sister's work by only sitting useless at Jesus' feet.

And Sunday is when we have everyone together, so let's shorten the sermon and lengthen the announcements and skip Sunday School and interrupt coffee hour so we can have a meeting and make progress.

Why can we not just come in here and lie down, eat, drink, chill, rest, breathe, be?

Why must we resist the gifts of the good shepherd; why must we keep chasing so frantically after goodness instead of letting mercy pursue us?

The voice of the door calls us in to rest, to recharge, to renew, to receive life abundant in the midst of an unyielding panic that says busy is best and time is scarce.

The voice of the door calls us in.

And then, in time, the voice of the door also calls us out.

Once we are fed and watered, once we have supped at the table prepared before us in the presence of our enemies who also get invited here because the doors are so frustratingly open, the voice also summons us to go out and, in our turn, to nourish the world.

Martha has a point too.

There is time and urgency for service in the world, time to share the goodness and to work the mercy we receive in here out there.

The voice will not permit us just to huddle up and hunker down, to remain in our protective shell detached from the world that God so loves.

It is not enough for us to gather as an exclusive, self-centered supper club, a clique of friends content merely with being together.

The gate that invites in the outsiders also sends out the insiders to bless the world.

So our life together is one of moving through the doors often, in both directions, in to

receive grace, out to share it, in, out, in, out, the well-balanced dance of grace, and the more we do it, the more we pass through those doors, the more we hear the voice, the more we encounter the Christ, the more we understand who he is and who we are.

Jesus is the threshold, not just between in here and out there, but also between God and humanity, between heaven and earth, the connecting boundary that brings us together and unites us with God.

The voice speaks in both directions.

In John's gospel, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus spends four long chapters speaking with his disciples, dropping one confusing figure of speech after another, trying desperately to invite them inside, into his relationship of abundant life with God.

Then, in the very next chapter, he prays for them.

He speaks in the other direction, inviting God into the life of his disciples, telling God about his relationship of abundant life with them, beckoning God to come through him to them.

The gate with the voice summons the shepherd as well as the sheep, summons in as well as out, summons together us and God, church and world, friends and enemies, work and rest, still waters and overflowing cups, comfort and challenge, Martha and Mary, strange and familiar, take and give, our duty and our joy, until life is abundant for us all, and until our dense ears and sheepish lives are as open as The Gate is.