

Led Out From a Culture of Death

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John 10: 1-10

Jesus is talking to some of the Pharisees, here. Specifically, he's talking to some Pharisees who were extremely upset that he had cured a man born blind on the Sabbath. In fact, he's just pointed out to them the essence of sin, all sin, and their sin in this case. He says it's in being so sure that they have "righteousness," acceptability all nailed down. So, he says to them, "because you say 'we see,' your blindness remains." From there he goes right into this teaching for today.

See, the problem is that there are those, even those who would lead, who do not identify with those who get victimized. And consequently, says Jesus, they are blind to seeing how even their own leadership continues to make more victims. These Pharisees, you remember, would make not only the man born blind a victim, seeing his blindness as an indication of unacceptability, but they would also make Jesus their victim, because he has broken the Sabbath laws. And they would do all of that for seemingly very good, even altruistic motives!

John, you see, writes his gospel somewhere between 80 and 90 A.D. That was after the Roman's destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. And what had happened in the Jewish community following that was that they had turned in on themselves and become very closed, they felt, for the sake of their survival as a people, for the sake of the survival of their way of life. Understandably, they felt the need to draw the boundary close around themselves, saying 'this is who we are, these are our values and we must be vigilant about maintaining them and not letting them be diluted or compromised by outsiders, sinners, or those who would do us harm.'

And so, John, trying to form his community around the open accepting spirit of Jesus, tells this story. Jesus says, "anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by another way," that is, anyone who doesn't enter the sheepfold "by him" since he says that he's the gate, "is a ...bandit" who "comes only to steal and kill and destroy." He goes on to say that the gatekeeper opens the gate for this true shepherd of the sheep and the sheep recognize his voice. What we need to understand is that the sheepfold referred to here isn't some sheep pen out in the bucolic countryside somewhere. There wouldn't be a *gatekeeper* out there. This is the sheepfold near the Temple. This is the sheepfold where the sheep are taken before they are to be sacrificed on the altar, before they are made our victims. What Jesus is saying is that the true shepherd of the sheep enters into this sheepfold as a sheep himself, as a fellow victim. He enters as the "lamb of God" the One God offers to our demands for someone to sacrifice. No wonder they recognize his voice. He's one of them! And that's as opposed to those who don't identify with those victimized, and who end up making even more victims, even for seemingly good motives.

Life is always more complex than we are tempted to make it. Who do we, who are we willing to sacrifice, and to what end? I guess that depends on who we are, doesn't it? For some the answer would seem to be anybody who's weaker than they are, anybody who's an easy mark, children, the elderly, the handicapped. For others it's people who are different in some way, racially, culturally, religiously, or perhaps in their sexual orientation. I guess in some way it's always those who we perceive as somehow being a threat to us personally, or to our society, our way of life, much like the Jewish community was feeling at the end of the first century. In any case, such people become for us to some degree expendable, don't they. They often become our victims.

In thinking about this, I was reminded of that very powerful Old Testament story about King David and his son Absalom. You remember, as that story goes, Absalom, David's son, had gathered an army and was seeking to overthrow his father. And David's army went out to meet them, but David had told them that whatever happens, deal gently with the young man Absalom. But, you remember, as it happened, when the armies met, Absalom, riding on his mule had gone under a low tree and gotten caught by his hair in the branches, and he was left hanging there as his mule went out from under him. When, David's commander, Joab hears about it, being a man of action and knowing his duty to protect his king, takes ten men with him and they go and strike Absalom with their spears as he hangs there and kill him.

Absalom is the expendable one isn't he, for the sake of the continuing rule of David? And then, Joab sends messengers back to tell the King. They come back and they say: "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." The king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the second messenger when he's asked that same question by David answers: "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The story poses the question, "Who do we sacrifice?" "And to what end?" And it even suggests, doesn't it, how God in Christ answers that very question: "Would I had died instead of you..?" But, the whole story is even more complex, isn't it? Because the one who gets sacrificed is the one who would himself have despicably made a victim of his own father, who saw his father as an old man, and an easy mark. But, the real complexity lies in the fact that even so, Absalom was his father's son. I think of singer-songwriter Pierce Pettis' retelling of this story. His song is told from the viewpoint of David.

He says: Come and smear me with the branches of that tree
Hyssop dipped in innocent blood to make me clean
Will an old man's broken bones once more rejoice?
O Absalom, you were my little boy.

Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son, my son
Caught in the tangles of deceit
Hanging lifeless from that tree
Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son, my son
Caught in the tangles of your hair
The fruit of my own sins to bear
Oh Absalom

You were the laughing boy who bounced upon my knee
You learned to play the harp and use the shepherd's sling
Always watching, my impressionable son
O Absalom what have I done?

You were watching when I took a good man's wife
And gave the order for his murder just to cover up the crime
All the vanity, cruel arrogance and greed
O Absalom, you learned it all from me.

Who do we sacrifice—the weak, the different, the easy mark, or those who enact in some way exactly what they've learned from us, and from our "dog eat dog" culture? Isn't this what Jesus is saying?

Whether for those sacrificed, or for those doing the sacrificing, it all ends in death. Those who don't deeply identify with *all* victims, whether supposedly “innocent” or blameworthy, make more victims and it just goes on and on. It's what gave rise to Paul's agonizing question in Romans: Who will deliver me from this body of death? He's not talking about a physical, creaturely body in that sense. He's talking about this cultural body of death, where we can't ever get beyond just living the same ways of death over and over! Life is always more complex than we are tempted to make it.

Listen again to this gospel lesson. Jesus leads the sheep to be sacrificed out of that fold of death into abundant life! He calls them by name and leads them out! The point is not to be cozy in the sheepfold with Jesus, not to draw this boundary and say we're the ones safe from the threats and the sinners outside, because we're in here with the Good Shepherd. If we go into this fold “by him” it means we go in following his way. It's baptism. The only point of being *in* this fold is to learn how to die to self-survival, to learn how to die to “us and them” to learn how to die to the power of death. Because, finally the point is to be led out to find pasture, to be led out to find abundant life. And Jesus says in this little teaching, that's what he does. He takes the place of the victim, whoever that victim is, and by forgiving us our complicity in that whole culture of death shows us the way to life. You see, just like David and Absalom, we're all caught up in it together, aren't we? In sacrificing others, we sacrifice ourselves. So, the way to salvation is to relate to all others at the level that *they* are victims.

Baptist preacher, Will Campbell had been a preacher for many years when he had what he now calls his conversion experience. Having been pushed by one of his unbelieving friends for a one sentence definition of what Christianity is, what it believes he'd said: “We're all S.O.Bs but God loves us anyway.” But, then that definition came back on him one night. Campbell had been deeply involved in the civil rights movement in Mississippi, particularly in desegregating the University of Mississippi. But, in the middle of that struggle, a Klansman had brutally killed a young black civil rights activist, who Campbell had been close to. So, when he was absolutely crushed and angry about what had happened, Campbell's unbelieving friend had asked him, “Well, who do you suppose God loves more, that young black S.O.B., or that white KKK S.O.B.?” Campbell calls that his conversion experience.

He went on from there, as this active Civil Rights minister, to stand before the Baptist Convention and declare: “I'm pro Klan, because I'm pro human.” In sacrificing others whoever they are, whatever they've done, we sacrifice ourselves. We're all caught up in this culture of death together. Who will deliver us? “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The Lamb of God leads us out to abundant life by his way, the way that knows others deeply, where *they* are victims and relates to them out of that knowledge. It's the way of love. It's the way of life. Listen. He knows us and is calling our names. And we *can* follow.

Amen.