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5/3/20

Sixth distance worship in the time of Covid-19

The Gate

I Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-11

Jesus spoke the words we just read after a conflict with the Pharisees. You know the story even if you do not yet know to which story I refer. A man “blind from birth” asked Jesus to restore his sight. Jesus made a paste of mud and put it on the man's eyes. When he wiped it off the man could see. So far, so good. But this happened on a Sabbath. The Pharisees demanded that all Jews refuse to do any sort of work on the sabbath. Jesus had made the mud paste. He had worked. Therefore, they reasoned, he could not “come from God”. When the formerly blind man staunchly professed his belief that Jesus was—at the very least—a prophet, the Pharisees “cast him out of the synagogue”. That is, they exiled him from his family and community.

Earlier this week I re-tweeted an article on Twitter. I had never heard of its author but I found his writing useful. A person who hides behind a nickname tore into me. I lack understanding of the most basic concepts. If I like the author of the original story I am an idiot. And my favorite: by daring to disagree with the guy behind the nickname, I had become a “bully”. When faced with simple disagreement, this guy projected his own insecurity and anger onto me, a person he does not know.

When faced with a healed man who gave credit to Jesus, the Pharisees projected their own insecurity and anger onto the formerly blind man. Instead of reconsidering their ideas in light of powerful evidence they might **just** be wrong, they attacked an innocent third party. This provoked Jesus into doing two things. First, he told the formerly blind man that he, Jesus, was the son of Man of whom the prophets had spoken. He claimed his divine office and power. As the son of Man he was and is the God-sent agent of salvation. Those who say Jesus never claimed to be God do not understand the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John.

Jesus' second reaction was to tell the parable of sheep, a sheepfold, a thief, a shepherd and a gate. This is one of two New Testamental parables which Jesus explained after telling it (the other is the Sower and the Seeds). The sheep are God's people. The sheepfold is life lived under the protection of God. The Pharisees are the thief. Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate. The shepherd persona we instinctively understand. We would expect Jesus to play that role; it is a common image we have of him and a constant theme throughout the Bible. He guides us beside still waters. He is the Good Shepherd who searches for one missing sheep when ninety-nine have safely entered the paddock for the night.

But why did Jesus call himself the Gate? Gates perform two functions. They permit, and they prohibit, access. Jesus is both our access to God and our protection against the thieves seeking to take us away from God. He permits us access to good pasture and keeps the thieves at bay. "I have come," he concluded, "that (the people

of God) might have life, and life abundant.” That word abundant means lavish, copious, comprehensive. We have a greater life here and now because we follow the Shepherd. We have the promise of life eternal with the Shepherd. Following him seems far the better course than ignoring him. Follow the Shepherd and live!

The author of I Peter preceded our passage with instructions that slaves obey their masters. This is one of those Bible passages we interpret through the lens of its time; it does not literally apply to us today. But the author goes on to make an interesting connection between human slavery and Jesus' slavery to suffering and thus, saving us from our sins. By accepting bondage, a death he did not deserve, he “healed” us. As Burlap to Cashmere, a Christian MexiCali band (yes, that is a musical genre), put it in their song, Basic Instructions:

“Man sinned, God died,
God rose, man's side,
Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth”

(As an acronym, Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth reads, “Bible”.) When we follow our shepherd we receive life abundant. He feeds and protects us here and now. And because he died to take away our sins, he offers us eternal life.

The way we preachers speak of the heroes protecting us during this pandemic can almost make them sound like Christ figures. They cannot be, as their sacrifices—while terribly real and tragic—do not save souls. Jesus' death on the cross stands as the one event in all time that offers abundant life in every sense. Nevertheless, our heroes do save lives. Perhaps by considering one of their stories we might come to a

sharper understanding of Jesus' sacrifice.

Twenty-one year old Valeria Viveros of Riverside, California worked as an assistant at a nursing home in suburban Los Angeles. She knew her job put her in grave danger but heard a calling to work with geriatric patients. She had known it half her life. At community college, when the students in her year finished the general courses and started taking classes more targeted at specialties she was one of very few to choose to prepare to serve the aged. Despite pleas from her aunt, she continued going to work even after a wave of Covid 19 infections hit her facility and over a dozen residents died. Early this month she spiked a fever. Two days later she entered the intensive care unit. Seven days after that, she died. On her last cogent day she, intubated on a respirator, indicated she wanted a pen and paper. On the pad she wrote, "I put myself in the hands of Jesus."

I believe that Valeria Viveros would understand Jesus' parable of the shepherd and the gate without any help from me. In fact, I believe she has passed through that gate. And I believe that we, living under the shadow of the virus that killed her, have the opportunity to use these strange, threatening times to make certain we belong to that flock just as surely as a young woman who could write, "I put myself in the hands of Jesus." She did not write, "I'm angry I did not get the life I wanted." No, she wrote words of mature and faithful understanding.

We would all do well to put ourselves in the hands of Jesus. Follow the Shepherd and live! Really live, even in a time of death. In a moment we will

celebrate communion. Among its central meanings is the remembrance of Jesus death. We break the bread. We pour the cup. We recall his broken body and shed blood. But we also remember that as the son of Man he showed forth his power even