

The Gate

Texts: Buechner reading from *Telling the Truth: Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tail*; Psalm 23; John 10: 1-10
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When the Noah and Emily were younger I was walking through a Mall-remember that thing that we used to be able to do?- when I got stuck. Not stuck, as in trapped and unable to get out, but stuck as in unable to get past the group of people ahead of me.

It was a family, mother, father, and six children, all walking together, all walking slowly, all walking in front of me. There was no way around. And then all of a sudden, they stopped walking and looked in a store window. I almost crashed into them.

I said, "Excuse me, may I get past" to try to get by, and the mother reached out her arms and herded her little sheep together, "Oh, sorry" she said, and suddenly I was in the clear again.

In the ancient world, everyone knew how hard it was to be a shepherd, to get the sheep to pasture, to get the sheep to water, to get the sheep past the brambles, to get the sheep safely home again. They all knew about that. We don't.

But we do know about how hard it is to get the kids to soccer, get the kids to ballet, get the kids to school and get the kids to church on time, then get them safely home again. That we know about, many of us from firsthand experience, others as aunts and uncles and grandmas and grandpas, others still as teachers and principals. Some in all those ways.

Kids and sheep are a lot alike. I say this, not because growing up I had a frequent babysitter named Olive, who was from England, who used to say things like, "Be a lamb, and hand me my knitting!" and "That's it, lamb chop, thank you," but because both sheep and kids are somewhat unpredictable and need constant watching.

You'll be planting together in the backyard, and look up to do a head count and find that Adam has wandered around the front of the house. Again.

Or sitting out front with the kids riding bikes and when you turn around from watching Emily, you find Noah is way down the street riding to the corner on his own. Kids can get away in an instant. So can sheep.

The shepherd would be watching the flock and suddenly find that one of the sheep had wandered off down by a stream with fast flowing waters and had fallen in. Off he raced to pull the sheep out with his shepherd's staff, making a mental note to lead the sheep beside still waters the next time.

A sheep, you see, is covered in wool, no great revelation there, I know, but wool when wet weighs a wot, I mean, weights a lot, and the sheep would easily drown if it fell into a swiftly moving river, dragged under by the weight of its own wool.

And then the shepherd might get back to the flock to find them all stuck in brambles and easy prey for wolves since a stuck sheep is a defenseless sheep – well, even an unstuck sheep is a pretty defenseless sheep since the only thing it can do is run away, but stuck in brambles, it can't even do that.

The shepherd might make a mental note to lead the sheep into really green pastures next time, where the brown brambles are easily seen.

The economist E. F. Schumacher tells about an old shepherd he met who told him, "Don't count the sheep or they won't thrive."

What the shepherd meant by this was that putting a number on a sheep meant that it became something abstract, something less than individual, less than the living, breathing, distinctive animal it was.

I don't know about you, but in my family, my mom had a hard time remembering our names. She'd say, "David, no Andrew, no ... what is your name?" I'd always unhelpfully suggest "Bill?" at that point. But eventually she would get there.

Each child is different. Some are full of self-confidence, others are shy. Some are risk-takers, others are more timid. Some become defiant in the face of adversity, others break down in tears.

Each child is an individual, and each child gets treated differently, though a

parent hopes still fairly. The child gets what *they* need, not what the other children need.

Children often complain when they perceive that another child is getting something that they didn't. "Hey, that's not fair! Why didn't I get that too!" At least, they do when the other child is getting rewarded for something. Then they want all to be treated the same.

But I don't think any child has ever said, "That's not fair! How come he's the one to get a time-out and not me!" When it comes time to discipline, children understand that each person needs to be treated differently, according to who they are and what they've done. Each child is an individual. Modern mothers and fathers understand this, too.

Perhaps this is why our Scripture passage today about the Good Shepherd stresses so much the intimate relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep. They are not numbers to him, for he calls them all by name. They are individuals.

Jesus doesn't care about the numbers in the pews. Instead, he cares about Heidi and Jim and Chad and Bridget and Joanne and Bill and Mindy and Caroline and George and Noah and Emily and Adam and Amelia and Naomi and Olivia and Peter and Evelyn and Sean and Robbie and Davis and Natalie and Mira and Ian and Ryan... well, you get the picture. If I didn't call your name, well, Jesus did, and he knows you and loves you, because you are one of his sheep, and he is the good shepherd.

Now being a mom or a dad means suffering pain. They don't tell you this before you have kids. Kids like jumping on you. Sometimes they jump when you aren't expecting it, or *where* you aren't expecting it, seemingly trying to prevent you from having more kids!

Kids swing their heads around without looking and hit you in the face. My dad lost two teeth from my head, and my three kids have been trying, so far unsuccessfully, to return the favor.

Kids throw things at you from point blank range, hard things, and think it's funny when you double over in agony. Being a parent can be painful.

So can being a good shepherd. Just getting the sheep home might be

painful. The sheepfold was often right beside the shepherd's home, and its entrance was often not just a gate, which might come unlatched or swing open in a storm, but also a series of sticks put across the gateway.

The sticks worked like those modern cow gates: the sheep are afraid of stepping on them and breaking an ankle, so they won't go near the entrance. When the shepherd wants to get them in, he has to lie down on the sticks and let the sheep walk across the bridge that his body makes. That had to hurt a bit! But it was what had to be done to keep the sheep safe.

Jesus tells us that he's the gate into heaven, that is, though the entrance is kind of scary, and death is scarier than a row of sticks, that's for sure, Jesus is the one who lays down his own body across death from earthly life to eternal life. Jesus' sheep walk across the bridge that his own body makes, and get safely home again.

Jesus himself is the gate, and because he loves us and knows us, he is ready to lay down his life for us. We have great value for him, ultimate value. That's the point that Jesus is trying to make in talking about shepherds and mere hirelings facing off against a thief.

Now, we may be unsure about the difference between shepherds and hirelings and protecting sheep from thieves.

Instead let's do what we've already done so often, and replace sheep with children. Instead of a shepherd or a hireling facing off against a thief, we might instead think of something more familiar to us, say the difference between a parent and a babysitter confronted by home invaders trying to take a child.

A baby sitter would likely hide, maybe try to call the police or shout for help. But if a parent saw home invaders trying to take her child, the parent would be up and fighting the invaders with a holy fury to the last ounce of her strength and to the last drop of her blood.

The parent would not hesitate to lay down her life for her child and would count it a fair deal if with her last breath she could see the kidnapping home invaders vanquished and her child safe and sound.

That's what Jesus the good shepherd is like. He sees that we are in trouble, sees that we are in danger of being taken and lost, perhaps forever. And he fights against the sin and death which are trying to take us with every ounce of his strength and every fiber of his being to his last gasp of breath and his last drop of blood.

Before he dies, he makes sure that the gate is down and we can safely cross over. The Good Shepherd gives his life to make sure that we are safely home.

No, we might not understand all there is to know about a shepherd and his sheep, but we do understand the relationship of a parent and a child. We do understand what it means to sacrifice ourselves for another.

We are the sheep of Jesus' pasture; we are the children of God. Let us give thanks in this Easter season that Jesus is like a good shepherd, and God is like a good mother, and that because of Easter, we can enter the Gate and get safely home.

Amen