

Whenever I ask folks about this reading, they get the part about being compared to sheep and resent it some. I certainly don't blame you. Sheep are not very attractive animals. They're dirty and smelly. They have a reputation for being incredibly stupid, totally dependent on the shepherd. They're skittish, easily spooked, stubborn one minute, and exuberant and impossible to contain the next. They move like birds in a flock taking cues from each other, no sense of their own. We're much more comfortable describing someone else as a sheep than we are accepting an apparent description of ourselves as sheep.

On the other hand, given recent crises, the description may be more apt than we'd like to admit. After all what we seem to have in common with sheep is that basic herd mentality. We imitate one another, panic at the slightest movement and yet stand still with the rest of the flock at the presence of danger. Like sheep our opinions and attitudes, even our identities are largely suggested, like hypnotic suggestion, by the social and cultural consensus among which we live. We are constantly looking to each other to see how we are doing, what we believe and what we think about any given issue.

The fact that we live with the myth of individualism, of an individual identity, independent opinions, and our own personal desires and responsibility, only confirms the reality of the social other that constitutes us. We internalize and make our own what we hear and see both negatively and positively in our environment. There is a social reality that shapes us and forms in us its own voice, its own identity.

The New Testament assumes this reality, though it describes it according to its own primitive world view, filled with demons and angels, good spirits and evil spirits. It nevertheless recognizes the dynamic of contagion, the dynamic herd mentality that calls people into being by a social reality before which they are powerless. The spectacle of Holy Week is our best illustration. The disciples are committed to Jesus, as is the entire city at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but in a matter of hours, in the face of the gravitational pull of the hysterical crowd, their promises to be loyal are all but forgotten, and they scatter.

Yet Jesus is apparently immune to the influence and the attraction that leads to their betrayal. He is entirely formed by—and responds to—the voice of His Father, the voice of the one true God. He is not interested in the opinions or the approval of the disciples or the high priest or of Pilate the Roman governor. So it is always for us a matter not of *whether* we will be formed and called into being by another but to *which* other we will respond. To whose tune will we dance! Throughout his ministry Jesus is going off, away from his disciples and the crowd, to be alone to pray, to refine his hearing of the Voice of his Father. So that when he gets into the crisis of his last week he will not mistake the voices from the outside, the internalized voice of Satan, for the voice of his Father. This is the importance of Silence and Solitude for us, as well.

When he says here in John 10 that that he is the Good Shepherd and that the Good Shepherd calls us by our Name, he is saying, in effect, that our true identity, given us in

Creation, is being invited through the gate out of the sheepfold, that constitutes by the social consensus, and into the abundant reality of a life that will never end. And we know that voice of the one who goes ahead of us.

He has been preparing us to leave the reality where we are conformed and constituted by the opinions, attitudes and the approval of others, where we react to the social other and so are filled with fear, especially fear of death and of anything that looks to us like “a death.” The way out of death is through His own death and resurrection. It is as if by showing us that by going freely to his own death, he is assuring us that if we follow him, we do not need to fear death either. He says, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” A few verses later he says that he has power to lay down his life and to receive it again. And that same power he has given to us in baptism. Baptism is the death and resurrection that each of us experiences ahead of time. So that when we are face with death in whatever for it comes, in the form of fear or intimidation, or scarcity, or actual physical death, we can walk freely into it, blessing and forgiving those who may be the agents of that death. As the passage from Peter has it, “If we suffer let it be for the approval of God.”

Now, let me say something about this new ability to face death in the life of St. Stephen, the deacon and first martyr and our patron Saint. Every community and culture, every human institution and family, however small or large, is based, on a lie, in some sense, on an expulsion, even on a violent murder and on a cover-up. And every community and institution keeps peace with a secret and an implicit threat of violence and murder that is unconscious even to its own rulers and leaders. Stephen as the first after the resurrection to take up his cross and follow Jesus, also speak the same truth to the rulers of his community, pointing out to them that their power and authority “from the foundation of the world” is based on the murder of the prophets, the truth tellers of their own day, from Abel to John the Baptist. And now they have added to that long list the murder of Jesus, God’s anointed one.

The boldness of Stephen is what is so remarkable. Here is one who has been freed from the fear of death, to be able to walk in the way of Christ, recognizing that in Christ he has already died, and so death no longer has any power over him. And like Jesus, because he is imitating Jesus, there is no resentment, anger or self-righteousness in Stephen. But the hearers cannot take it. They block their ears to his words and rush on him, dragging him out of the City so that he can be stoned beyond the walls just as Jesus was, so that his death by their hands could be cleansed from their memories, expelled from their consciousness. So with a clear conscience they could return to the oblivion of their preoccupation with their own opinions and with their self-congratulatory goodness and security.

But you, my sisters and brothers, you are a people called after St. Stephen, called by the voice of God tuned to St. Stephen. Having in baptism died already and been returned to life, to the never-ending life of the resurrection, you have answered the call into being of the God who from outside of the world calls the world into being in relation to God’s self. So let us imitate Stephen, who while being stoned to death, a death where no one could ever be blamed or held accountable, nevertheless prayed for the forgiveness of his attackers. Let us answer the call to come out into the freedom, forgiveness, abundance and love of God.