

Some years ago, I visited Colonial Williamsburg. Behind one of the Colonial-style houses were two sheep pens separated by a fence with a gate. Somehow, one of the little lambs had gotten on one side of the gate, but all the other sheep were on the other side. The lamb kept bleating pitifully, as if asking someone to help him find the way to be united with the other sheep. I watched for a long time and the poor lamb did not figure out how to open the gate, nor did any of the other sheep, so he remained isolated and separated from the rest of the flock. I imagine and certainly hope that, at some point, a person saw that the lamb was separated from the others, came into the pen through the gate and allowed the lamb to pass through it and be reconciled with the others.

Jesus saw that we were lost and, came to us through the gate of death and resurrection so that, through that gate, we might find our way back to reunion with God and with others. No one else has come to us by that route and no one else has affected the same true reconciliation of each of us to one another and to God that Jesus did and does.

We see various types of advertisements for all sorts of products -- mattresses and electric blankets that are said to prevent arguments between spouses about how they like to sleep, mints, mouthwashes and toothpastes that brighten our teeth and keep our mouth smelling fresh, deodorants and soaps to keep our bodies smelling fresh, brightly colored and cool convertibles that help us attract

friends of the opposite sex -- but none of those can sustain us in a good relationship with our God and our fellow human beings. Because as soon as that other person finds out that we aren't always sweet smelling or cool or always have a perfectly kind, cheerful and compassionate personality, we get into trouble. Only the love of Jesus that led him to walk through that gate of suffering can change our hearts and minds and those of others to help us love and forgive. Only the death of Christ to pay the penalty of our sins. Only the resurrection of Christ that re-creates restores all things anew can make it possible for us to go on after we make mistakes. Only this can make restoration with others and God possible. Despite their claims to the contrary, things other than Jesus just don't do the job.

In Jesus's day, other things and other people also claimed to be the way to good and right relationships with God and others. The Pharisees were the leaders of Judaism in Jesus' day. They believed that one could achieve these right relationships by strictly following all the rules God gave Moses -- that isn't just the Ten Commandments, but every single little rule, such as rules about how far one might walk on the Sabbath, and when one needed to purify themselves before coming to synagogue to worship. In fact, for the Pharisees, if following the rules got in the way of caring for your neighbor, they'd counsel folks to follow the rules. They had criticized Jesus for healing people on the Sabbath, for example. And despite their

knowledge of Scripture, they were spiritually blind to who Jesus was. They were too blind to realize that Jesus was the Messiah that had been promised for ages.

The Pharisees wanted to be the leaders of the people of Israel, or metaphorically, the leaders of the flock of sheep. But they were trying to come into the sheep pen through the gates of rigid adherence to the law and rigid judgment of how to keep that law. Those were the wrong gates. Those gates were in contrast to Jesus coming in through the gate of love, self-sacrificing death and glorious resurrection.

The Pharisees were false shepherds who didn't really see people with a compassionate heart. Jesus is the true shepherd who loves us all and can call each of us by name. He comes to us when we are lost and restores us to union with God and our fellow man.

In my imagination of what happened with the little lost lamb in Colonial Williamsburg, a person (a modern-day shepherd) entered through the gate and picked up or gently led that little lamb back to the right place with his fellow lambs. The only thing the little lamb needed to do was to trust the good shepherd and allow himself to be led or picked up. If the lamb fights or refuses to follow, he might stay lost.

That's all we need to do as well. We need to trust that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and not trust any of those

false shepherds who seek to lead us by coming in the wrong gate. Then we allow Jesus to lead us back into the right pen, back in fellowship with others. If we are so lost or so spiritually and emotionally injured that we can't even walk with God's leadership, we allow Jesus to carry us. We as people may find allowing ourselves to be carried harder than our sheep friends do. We often want to be in control or to earn what we are given. But when we are willing to accept Jesus's leadership and, even, carrying of us, we will be returned to the fold, to love and be loved and reunited with God and our fellow man.

Amen