

# Sermon: **THE LAMB OF GOD**

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January 22, 2017

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

That could mean a whole lot of different things. There are a lot of interpretations of that. One common one is that Jesus is a sacrificial lamb, like an animal sacrifice that's made as a sin offering, in exchange for our sins. One problem with that interpretation is that it does not line up with Jesus' theology. Jesus shows us a God who just flat out forgives us, who doesn't need any payment, any sacrifice, any sin offering, just forgives us because that's the way God is.

We heard that vision of God in the psalm that we just read this morning. God does not require a sacrifice. What Jesus wanted us to see was a God that doesn't want us to slaughter anybody, even a sheep—that God just directly gives us forgiveness. More than once Jesus quoted the book of Hosea in which God says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

So thinking of Jesus as the Lamb of God in the sense that he's a sacrificial lamb doesn't quite work. But we know this: God is love and God loves us infinitely, and perfectly and completely. God provides for us. God gives our life meaning and purpose and power and beauty... but we have a hard time trusting that.

From the time we were infants we were loved imperfectly. No matter how wonderful our parents were, they weren't God. So we were loved imperfectly, and therefore we didn't know how to receive love perfectly. We didn't know how to trust because the love we knew was compromised, mixed in with a little love and a little maybe personal agenda, maybe a little frustration or desire or even anger or maybe just tiredness. It wasn't pure love.

And so we haven't learned that love can be pure, we've never experienced it. This is instinctive; it's in our bones, this distrust of God. That distrust of God is what we call sin. Sin is not that we're bad; we're not evil people. We're just hurting. We're just distrustful. Out of that fear, that distrust, comes all of our sins, all of our evil, all of those bad hurtful things that we do. But the root of it is that we're afraid.

Jesus knows that. And he knows that because we're afraid of God we have this image of God who might love us for a while but might also punish us and hurt us, who might want us to obey not for our sake, but just so that God gets God's way. So there's this little fear in us: our awe and reverence has slipped into distrust.

Jesus knows that. So Jesus comes among us and shows us God's love so clearly that it relieves our fears. He shows us a God who is forgiving, not vengeful, so that we know we can trust God. He forgives us so that we don't have to be afraid of failure. He provides for people, feeds people, even miraculously multiplies food so that we don't have to be afraid for our own survival. He heals people so we don't have to be afraid of suffering. He includes the outcasts so we don't have to be afraid of one another, afraid of strangers, afraid of people who are different from us. He embodies the way God brings life out of death and blessing out of chaos so that we don't have to be afraid of anything, even death, even our own mortality. And he comes among us gentle as a lamb. Even when we throw our fear in his face and crucify him, he still returns it with love and with forgiveness, not with fear and anger, so that we have nothing to be afraid of. And then he comes back from the dead and says, "You don't have anything to be afraid of— not even death."

Gentle as a lamb, he relieves us of our fear. He carries it off. Lamb of God, he takes away the sin of the world.

Here's how that works for me. I care about the church. I want the church to thrive. I want the church to be as beautiful as God creates it to be. And I care about myself and I want to offer the gifts that God has given me. A lot of the time that happens. But some of the time the church isn't exactly doing everything that I think God is calling us to do. Sometimes we fall short. Sometimes we just mess up. Sometimes we fail. God wants us to be a bold witness for justice and forgiveness and peace but sometimes our voice is pretty muffled. God wants us to be a perfectly loving community; sometimes we are and sometimes we're not. God wants us to be the kind of community which, like the disciples, brings people close to God. Sometimes we sort of drive people away.

When that happens sometimes I'm just disappointed and concerned— but sometimes I'm afraid. As a pastor sometimes I think it's my fault. Sometimes I think there must be something I'm doing wrong. Sometimes, just as a human being, sometimes I'm afraid that I don't have it right and I've got to prove myself better. And when I get afraid, in that place of sin, then I hurt people. I might get flippant, or I might sound bossy or pushy. I might come off as authoritarian. I might push back at somebody instead of listening to the. If I do that I betray everything I believe and value about myself and my calling and the gospel and the church. I hurt people because I'm afraid.

But then Jesus comes along and says, "Steve. You are God's child, in whom God is well pleased. Do not be afraid." I don't have to be so afraid. Jesus says "Of course you make mistakes, big ones. You hurt people, of course you do. You're a human being. You are forgiven." I don't have to be so afraid of failure. "Of course it's not going the way you want it to go. You don't have

that much power. Get over it. Don't be afraid." I don't have to be afraid of not being able to make it work out right. Of course the church isn't what God wants it to be. "Steve," Jesus says, "I've got this, let it go." I don't have to be so afraid—and then I don't hurt people. Because Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away that fear, that distrust, that sin.

Of course I take it right back. That's why John says Jesus is the Lamb of God who *takes* away the sins of the world. It's present tense. He didn't say "took away" because it's still going on. Like soap takes away dirt. It doesn't make it all disappear; it just takes away *this* dirt... until you get dirty again.

So part of what it means to follow Jesus is to get close to Jesus, close enough that I can let him take away my fear, moment by moment, day by day. Jesus returns me to that trust in God and God's grace. I have to stay close enough to Jesus that I actually experience that, because it's not enough to just believe that there's some guy off there in the clouds that did something once that got me saved. That's not good enough. I need to experience intimacy with Jesus. I need to follow him closely enough that he actually can take away my distrust of God.

Now there's more to following Jesus than just that. John says, "Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins, the sin *of the world.*" Wow. That's a big job. Jesus is not done with that yet. Look at the world. Does it seem like the world's sins have been taken very far away? I don't think so. This world is seized with fear. The level of fear and distrust all through the world is so deep. We just inaugurated a President whose campaign and platform and program is all about fear. He wants us to be afraid of Muslims, and immigrants, and foreigners in other countries, and poor people and queer people.... It goes on and on and on. He's working the fear program. It's thick in our country.

God really needs some lambs who will take away that fear. In the same way that God sent Jesus, Jesus sends us to be lambs of God who take away the sin of the world. People who can live with such gentleness and listen with such reverence, and honor one another with such courage, that people don't have any reason to be afraid, at least of us. We're called to set aside all our judgments and our fears and our angers and be gentle as lambs, so that at least in our presence we can take away a little bit of their fear, so that this world can be healed.

That will require a great deal of us lambs. But it can be done.

Yesterday I was out on the Boston Common with a couple hundred thousand of my closest friends marching. And there were maybe 150,000 different reasons that we were marching. There were some people who were there just there for no other reason than to say mean things about President Trump, but there was a whole lot more going on than that. There were so many voices for justice, for kindness, for goodness. And it wasn't until I got there that I realized why I was marching. I was marching in order to be surrounded by 150,000 people experiencing

hope. While we were there we were texting with two sons, one in Washington D.C. and one in St. Paul Minnesota... and watching the news of 780 marches around the world from Boise, Idaho and Jacksonville, Florida and Anchorage, Alaska to the South Pole, and Taiwan and Norway and Mongolia and everywhere in between.

That's why I marched and I didn't realize that until I got there: to be surrounded by people who are not afraid and not angry. A hundred and fifty thousand people were packed in like firewood. We were way far away from the stage. We could not hear what they were saying. We were just cheering for the cheering. There was supposed to be a march but it was so crowded nobody was marching. We were just there. We couldn't hear anything. We were just there. No one was angry or impatient, nobody. One hundred and fifty thousand people just happy to stand there and hold our signs, and talk to each other and take pictures of each other's signs and ask, "Where are you from.?" Helping each other out, sharing food and water. Just standing there.

Some people marched. We shuffled. We kind of shuffled. In the time that some people walked all the way around the march down Comm. Avenue and back and back to the park the people that I was with went from up on the hill on Beacon Street to a little farther down the hill on Beacon Street. That's as far as we got because there were too many people. And we were all at peace.

What if the church were like that? What if we were a church that came together to relieve one another of our fears? To just be joyful and happy and hopeful together. To pledge to kindness together. To relieve one another of our fears. We are human beings. God gives us the power to change this world to undo the work of fools, to stand up against the world when it's violent and hateful with gentleness. We can be the lambs of God who take away the sin of the world. We just have to practice. Follow that lamb. Learn to trust God. Let Jesus relieve us of our fears. And when we fail at that job, which we certainly will, God will forgive us.

Do not be afraid. In the spirit of Jesus we can be lambs of God who take away the sin of the world.