

Betsey Moe
Sermon 10.5.08
“By Name”

[Psalm 139]

John 10:1-18

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

I had a teacher in high school who was especially gifted with knowing names. His name was Sam Adams – everyone knew *his* name. When Mr. Adams strolled down the bustling school hallway and shouted out, “Hey, Matt! Hey, Katie! Hey, Betsey! Hey, Brian!” he would make a nobody feel like a somebody.

Mr. Adams was a math teacher, and a good one. But he was more than a math teacher because he understood us to be more than math students. We weren’t objects to be taught; we were subjects, real people with stories and abilities of our own. At the beginning of the year, he would ask each student to pull out a blank sheet of paper and write his or her name at the top. Then he would ask us to write the answers to a series of questions about ourselves – how many siblings we had, what their names were (in case he had them before) what we enjoyed doing in our free time, who was the most influential person in our lives, what we hoped to be and do someday if failure were not a possibility. He told us that he would take these papers home, make a big batch of chocolate chip cookie dough, and stretch out in his recliner with the papers in one hand and the dough in the

other and read all about us. We wondered what this had to do with math. But Mr. Adams knew that if we trusted that *he* cared about *us*, we would care about the math. And it worked; student math scores soared in Mr. Adams' class. Because we were known, we flourished.

In today's scripture lesson from John, we hear about a shepherd who knows his sheep "by name." Knowing sheep by name was, surprisingly to me, a common practice for shepherds in ancient Palestine. I don't suspect they used names like "Bubbles" or "Mr. Wiggles," but according to one commentator, they *would* have assigned names like "Black-ear" or "Brownface" or "Cut-leg" in order to keep track of their sheep. The sheeps' names represented their histories and temperaments. This same commentator said that each evening, the shepherd himself would stand at the opening to the sheep-pen, acting as both shepherd and gate and forcing these named sheep to enter underneath his lowered staff so that he could inspect each one for injury and find out if Black-ear or Brownface or Cut-leg were missing.

There is a central contrast that drives this passage: the contrast between the shepherd, who knows the sheep by name, and the thieves and bandits and hired hands who do *not* know the sheep. Thieves and hired hands see the sheep as objects, as commodity – not as precious creatures entrusted to their care. Only the one who knew the sheep's stories and names and who would be willing to lay down his life for the sheep was to be trusted.

As readers of the gospel of John, we have seen that Jesus did, indeed, value names: He says to Peter the first time he meets him, "You are Simon, son of John" (1:42). He shouts to his friend in a tomb, "Lazarus, come out!" (11:43). And then there's that unforgettable call in the garden the morning Jesus rose: "Mary!" (20:16). Names and, even more importantly, the people who carried those names mattered to Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

On World Communion Sunday, we marvel even more at Jesus when we consider how vast is his pasture. Jesus, who embodies Psalm 139 about the One who knows me, does not just know *me*; he knows and loves his people all over the world. And how does he do that? Through us! He told his disciples in John chapter 14 that after he left, *they* would be the ones to continue his work. They – we – would do even greater works than he did.

Knowing and caring for God's flock is no small task. Right now in other parts of this city and country and world, there are people wondering if anyone cares: victims of violence in Sudan, mothers frantically trying to find healthcare in Zimbabwe, frightened Pakistani refugees, hurricane evacuees in the Gulf without jobs or savings, abused children here in Spokane. A birds-eye view of this world pasture would more resemble the needy *crowds* that Jesus encountered in his ministry – crowds described as "harassed and helpless, like sheep *without* a shepherd." Truly, providing for these frantic and fearful crowds is an overwhelming prospect. But it all begins by caring like a good shepherd about names. It all begins by meeting the other sheep in this pasture, one sheep at a time.

Knowing names – caring about individuals – stands in the face of the way much of Christian Service has been carried out in our history. Perhaps because the task of caring

for one another seems so large, we have taken impersonal approaches to serving and have attempted to solve problems without getting to know people. Traditional mission trips are about getting a lot of work – usually physical work – done in a short amount of time. Perhaps because of our “progress” mentality, we slip into treating others as objects to be acted upon or ministered to. But when a person is given time or attention – when we seek to know someone by name and story – that someone becomes a subject, an actor in God’s drama, whose life and actions have implications for us and for the whole world. When we can name someone from a particular group that we consider “other,” a deeper compassion is awakened and all of us are encouraged to become the full human beings we were created to be.

Two nights ago, I participated in the “Urban Plunge” with twelve other people from our church. We met at the House of Charity, then took a tour together downtown, stopping at the sometimes makeshift homes of four different people and hearing their stories. Jerry Schwab, who works at the House of Charity and leads the Urban Plunges, stressed at the beginning that we were not there to “serve” anyone. We were not there to give anything but our time and our listening ears. First, we listened to Ken, a veteran, and his wife Sandy, a couple living out of their van because shelters and transitional apartments can only accept singles. We listened under the freeway to Dottie, who had been abused as a child and subsequently suffered from mental trauma and addictions. We listened to Neil, proud and thrilled to have just moved into his own apartment; Neil’s story involved having a degenerative disease and being struck by lightning. We listened to Gene, another veteran of deep faith dying of liver cancer, living at the Tradewinds Hotel. What we saw and heard in one night on the Urban Plunge was more worthwhile for me than some extended Mission Trips I’ve been on, and it was because our only task was to consider these people not as objects but as subjects whose lives and actions have implications for the whole world.

I’ve heard this experience – this shift from seeing others as objects to be ignored to subjects to be respected – lived out in the church over and over again: “I thought teenagers were rebellious, disrespectful, intimidating – until I became a confirmation mentor.” “I thought all prisoners were scary and depraved – until I started tutoring in a prison with my church group.” “I thought all homeless people were lazy, until I went on an Urban Plunge.” When we follow in the way of the shepherd who gave his life for his sheep – when we die to ourselves and enter into relationships with people whose experiences are different from our own, our stereotypes fall, our perspectives sharpen, our fears dissipate, and we experience one another as God experiences us: as subjects whose actions influence the kingdom of God.

There are five “missionaries” from Hamblen this week in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, outside of New Orleans. If they are like any other group that has gone, they will say that the value in the trip was in hearing the stories. The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has a phrase that they encourage volunteers to remember: “Stop, Drop, and Listen.” What they mean is that if a local resident stops by the worksite and is willing to share his or her story, volunteers are to stop what they are doing, drop what they’re holding (unless it’s a sledgehammer) and listen, because hearing the story is a greater priority than the work.

The good people overseeing volunteers in the Gulf know that transformation comes through the relationships, through knowing the people.

Name-knowing, story-knowing, is not something that is only practiced on a Mission of Service Trip; it is a habit that begins right here. You join a Sunday School class or a Bible Study and start getting to know the hopes and fears of the people around the circle. You volunteer for a committee around which you have passion and get to know others who share that passion. You support a missionary or a Compassion child financially and through your prayers and letters. You discipline yourself to go to the Fellowship Hour every week and meet people you've never met before. In so doing, you practice the art of knowing names and the people who carry those names, and make relationships with "the other" a way of abundant life.

In talking with many of you over the last few months, I have heard over and over how special it is that you are known by Pastor Ken. He knows your names and your stories – and over time, I hope to as well. But as we celebrate World Communion Sunday today, I hope that all of you hear the call to carry that gift of being known out into the world. Our meal together will be so much more enjoyable as we can look at the strange and wonderful people sitting across from us and know them by name.