

Called by Name

John 10:3 "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for (the good shepherd), and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."



I have often mused at the fact that modern technology has made our lives easier, so much so that sometimes it seems we don't need other people anymore! We can fill our cars at the gas stations ourselves and pay at the pump with a credit card. We can do our banking totally through online or through ATM machines. Most of our grocery stores now come with self-checkout lanes where you only need a store employee if the computer breaks down. I can relay messages to friends by voice mail, without ever having to actually talk to them! And I note that I do most of my correspondence now through e-mail and text messaging, even with those who live nearby, and also that I prefer to shop on-line whenever possible. Machines, it seems, have made our lives much more independent and self-sufficient.

One of the results of this modernization, however, is a greater sense of isolation and loneliness in our lives. We don't know each other or our community as well as we used to, even in a small town like this one. We now wave to our neighbors as we pass them in our cars, when at an earlier time we would have stopped and talked to them on their porches or on the sidewalk. But our lives are so busy now that we don't really seem to have time to get to know one another anymore. Look around and see many of the people sitting in pews around you week after week whose names you do not know. And even if you do know their names, a recent study suggests that not many of you are close friends with each other.

So, as I pondered today's gospel story of Jesus as the good shepherd, who knows us all and calls us each by name, I wondered whether it is simply enough for Jesus to know us, or are we as a community of faith being asked to know, and allow ourselves to be known, by each other? I think the latter is what Jesus really meant when he said that he came so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. And thus, I have found myself brought up short, when I try to remember each of your names, especially as I distribute Communion, but alas my mind sometimes suddenly goes blank. Forgive me if it does. Perhaps it's only early onset dementia?

Nonetheless, some people may suggest now that the whole analogy of Jesus as a good shepherd is no longer relevant in our times and culture. Americans are more like ranchers than shepherds anyway. We have an ethos of cowboys and rugged individualism. "God helps those who help themselves," we say, quoting the most famous scriptural verse that is not actually found in the Scriptures. Thus, that image and understanding of God as one who cares and knows us intimately, one whose voice we hear deep within our hearts calling to us each by name, and calling us to do the same with one another, is perhaps needed in our day as much as at any time.

Several years ago, Ann Landers wrote the following in one of her columns: "Since I began writing this column, I've learned plenty - including most meaningfully what Leo Rosten had in mind when he said, 'Each of us is a little lonely, deep inside, and cries out to be understood.' I have learned how it is with stumbling tortured people of the world who have nobody to talk to. The fact that the column has been a success underscores for me at least the central tragedy of our society - the disconnectedness, the insecurity, the fear that bedevils, cripples, and paralyzes so many of us. I have learned that financial success, academic achievement, and social or political status open no doors to peace of mind or inner security. We are all wanderers, like sheep, on this planet," she concluded.

Today's gospel speaks of that much needed intimacy we long for as humans. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." He knows the number of hairs on our head, and calls to us each *by name*. What a powerful image that is! For what really is a name in the end? It is that distinctive designation of a person or thing that makes us the opposite of that which is nameless, anonymous, or indistinguishable. Being called by name is the ultimate sign of intimacy and being known for who we are.

Thus, I am embarrassed when I interact with parishioners, and don't know or can't remember your names. I feel it reduces others to the status of anyone in a nameless crowd, no different from a stranger passed on the street. And it is nothing but my own insecurity that keeps me from asking for the name, one more time.

Jesus, however, knows us as individuals and calls to us by name. And in our ever increasingly digital age, that's significant, I think. Because in some many other ways we have been reduced to a series of digits, the numbers on our driver's license, or social security card, our cell phone numbers, passwords, credit card numbers. We have been reduced to numbers much like the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps who had numbers tattooed on their wrists, prisoners who were not treated as human beings, but as faceless, impersonal commodities. It

makes it easier to ignore, to mistreat, to hate, even to kill one and another when we are just numbers or categories, and not named. Those Germans, those Jews, those Arabs, those Catholics, those homosexuals, those illegal immigrants, those uppity blacks, those Republicans --- no personal names, only lumped-together groups with no individual personalities. Only abstractions. Easy to dismiss, to discount, to ignore. Easy even to destroy.

Not many four-year-olds are quoted in national news magazines, but shortly after the tragic events of September 11th, I remember that *Newsweek* magazine featured a suggestion by four-year-old Laura Beth Kulbacki on how to deal now with terrorists who hated our country, full of people they don't even know. Laura Beth asked, "Why don't we just tell them our names?"

The basis of our isolation and our loneliness in today's world, that which so severely separates and divides us within communities, that which allows prejudice, hate, rejection, and persecution among us is this: reducing people to categories and groups, making them abstractions, not knowing who they really are, not listening to their cries, not being able to call to them by name. So often we just depersonalize one another. But the Jesus of today's gospel will have none of that. He knows his sheep and calls to them each by name, and invites us to do the same. And they know his voice and follow where he leads. No

abstractions for Jesus. We matter to him personally. All people matter to him personally, and to us, if we are indeed going to ever love our neighbors as ourselves. To overcome our divisions, even within this congregation, is to see people as individuals with a name and a history. Unless you live and eat and sleep with the sheep, as the shepherd does, then they will never be unique. They all just look alike from a distance. And it is the same with us. Unless we get to know each other intimately as persons, as individuals, unless we really listen to one another, understand each other's individual hurts and pains, then we are just members of this group or that, and we can be easily dismissed, and often are, when we fail to respect the dignity of every human being.

What Jesus set in motion was, above all else, a circle of friends, a community of the beloved, accepting into his midst most especially the outcast and rejected ones, providing for each as any had need. He treated his disciples as beloved friends, and even washed their feet. He dared to love them, and begged them to love one another, to rise above the world's enmities, to ignore traditional barriers, such as those separating Jews from Samaritans, men from women, dividing us into class and cultures. Jesus invited us to listen to one another and to get to know and understand one another. He sent his disciples out into the world to be friends to those who are

far off and to those who are near, to stay in strangers' homes long enough to form relationships, to listen and care for one another, to form communities of faith wherever they went, and to complete his mission in the world. They were willing to risk their lives becoming known to each other. And that is what we are to do as well. Not close our ears to some, not dismiss others, but to listen and to love all. To be the church that Jesus wants us to be means that we need to model our behavior after that of the Good Shepherd. We need to risk our insecurities and allow ourselves to know and be known, by name. Only then can we live the abundant life for which Jesus gave up his life to show us. AMEN