

God Calls Us By Name

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA at the 1998 Solanco High School Baccalaureate Service. Scripture Lesson: John 10:1-11

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus said, "He calls his own sheep by name." That means so much to me. Four scenes from my life. **Scene one: It's Easter Sunday, 1945.** I'm a baby. My parents are standing before the baptismal font. The minister asks, "What is the Christian name of your child?" "Theodore." The minister takes me in his arms and pours water over my head. "Theodore, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." When I got older. "What happened when I got baptized?" "Jesus called you by name. You belong to Jesus. Trust Jesus. Follow him."

Scene two: I'm 4 years old. My 18 year old sister hates baby sitting me. "You know what your name means? *Theodore* means *you stink*. *T-h-e*, The - *o-d-o-r*, odor - the odor. And you're an accident." She's referring to the fact that my father was 51 and my mother 44 when I was born so I was an accident. Later, Mom came to the rescue. "*Theodore* means God's gift. You're God's gift to us. You're no accident." Names mean something. And when Christ calls us by name it means that we're no accident. We're gifts from God. All of us.

Scene three: I'm 6 years old. My dad's about 60. "Want to go to work with me?" It was heaven to go to work with dad. He was a railroad engineer. We'd go to the *round house* in Wilmington where the trains were made up. Big, burly firemen and engineers covered with grease greeted us. "Is this your grandson?" Dad laughed. "No! He's *my* boy. He belongs to *me*." He was *so* proud of me, not because of anything I'd done, but *simply because I belonged to him*. When Jesus calls us by name it means that he knows and loves us, not because of what we've accomplished, but simply because we belong to him.

Scene four: I'm 18. I've been away at college for a semester. Now I'm home for Christmas. Mom greets me at the door and calls to my 70 year old dad, "Teddy's home." Dad looks at me with a vacant stare. He doesn't know my name. He doesn't know I belong to him. He's in the last stage of Alzheimer's disease. I began to wonder, "Is God like dad? Does God

look down from heaven with the vacant stare of an old man who forgets the names of his children?"

Albert Camus, in his novel, *The Stranger* spoke of "the benign indifference of the universe." I wondered if God was benignly indifferent to me? Does God even exist. I began to stray from God's ways like a lost sheep. I followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart. I offended against God's holy laws. But God had mercy on me. No matter what I thought or did I could never escape Christ's voice calling to me, "Ted, you belong to me." My hope is built on the truth of Christ's words. If his words aren't true, if I don't belong to Christ, life simply has no meaning for me.

And you - Christ calls you by name. You belong to him. Christ calls you by name to follow him wherever you go, whatever you do. You're not a number with God. He calls you by name. Listen!

A man traveling in India met a shepherd on a dusty road. "How many sheep do you have?" "I don't know." "How will you know at the end of the day if you've lost any?" "I know each sheep by name. At the end of the day I call them by name. If that sheep doesn't come I know it's lost and I go looking for it. But I've never really counted my sheep. I don't know how many I have." God is like that shepherd. Ask God, "How many children do you have?" God scratches his head and says, "I don't know. They're more in number than the sand of the sea and the stars in the sky. But I know the name of each one of them, and I call them by name." God doesn't love humankind in general. God loves *Stephanie* and *Michael* and *Laura* and *Randy Kay* and He calls you by name.

We're one of about 5 billion people living on planet earth. We're one of 250 million people living in the U.S. We're one of several thousand living in Oxford. But we're not merely a number to God. So many forces try to reduce us to a number, a Social Security number, a MAC card number, a phone number, a serial number, a statistic. And each time we're reduced to a number we become less human. But we're not a number to God. God calls us by name.

Elie Wiesel spent his teenage years in Auschwitz during World War 2. His mother, father and

sisters all died in Auschwitz. He was the only one in his family to survive. The first thing the SS soldiers did when Elie arrived in the death camp was reduce him to a number. "We were made to line up. Three prisoners brought a table and some medical instruments. With the left sleeve rolled up, each person passed in front of the table. The three prisoners, with needles in their hands, engraved a number on our left arms. I became A-7713. After that I had no other name." Strip a person of her name and it's not so hard to consign her to a gas chamber or call her a nigger, or a faggot,, or some other dehumanizing term.

Without a name, we're only things. I hate to be treated like a thing. Have you seen the movie, *Patch Adams*. Patch Adams rebelled against the tendency for doctors to refer to patients as things. He made a point of calling them by name. Ever been on an elevator filled with strangers? People avoid eye contact. I hate that! I recently visited a man in a hospital. I took the elevator. The only one in the elevator. A woman got on the second floor and pressed the 8th floor button. The doors shut. I smiled and said, "Hi, my name's Ted. What's yours?" She looked terrified. She got off the next floor. I don't like treating people like things. I want to know people's names. I want to call them by name. It's easy to see humanity as simply a large collection of cells and forget we all have names. I think of a woman who came to a counselor with a problem pregnancy. She felt she had no choice but abortion. She referred to her unborn child as a "little collection of cells." At some point her counselor asked, "Have you thought of a name for your baby?" The atmosphere changed. The woman fell silent. As soon as she named the child it ceased to be a "little collection of cells." It became a person. "It was staggering," the counselor said. "I felt as if I'd been present at an act of creation." God looks down at us and sees, not a collection of cells, but individuals and each with a name. "He calls his own by name."

When I was a boy I'd hear my mom calling, "Ted---dy, Ted---dy!" She kind of sang my name. She started out on a high note and then her voice fell on the second syllable. The first note was held, sometimes, for two or three seconds. "Ted---dy!" I might be in Woodward's cow field playing baseball. I might be down in the woods behind where Lenny Hook lived and I'd

hear her calling. **I might be miles and miles away on a date** and I'd hear her voice, "Teddy! Don't do that! Don't even think about it." I can still hear her voice echoing down the years. There might be a million other *Teds* but I could always recognize my mom's voice. And often when I heard her call my name I knew she was calling me to come home - "It's supper time."

God is like my mom. Wherever we go, whatever we do in life, God is like your mom calling you by name - if you belong to him. "Come home. It's supper time." You may have wandered far away from Jesus. You may be far away and lonely. You may be grieving the loss of someone. You may be going through marital strife. Financial problems. Health. Struggling. But, if you belong to Christ, you'll recognize his voice calling you home. He's prepared a table for you. Out there in the world wolves attack. Enemies surround you. Robbers seek to steal our souls. **But in Christ's sheepfold there's safety and in the House of the Lord there's mercy.** A lot of voices call to us, call us to do this and try that, call us to do things we know we shouldn't do and to be people who we really aren't. Loud voices! Often louder than the voice of Christ. But if we belong to Christ something inside tells us, "That's not what Jesus wants me to do - to be."

Remember to whom we belong. In life and in death we belong to God. **I think of a wonderful young man.** When he goes out on a date his dad puts two hands on his shoulders, looks him straight in the eyes and says, "Remember you belong to Christ!" That really irritates a teenage boy. Sometimes he doesn't want to belong to Christ. He wants to belong to himself. He wants to be his own person, do his own thing. But, hopefully, he'll never forget that he belongs to Christ. My guess is that most of us were claimed by Christ in baptism. Maybe you were confirmed. You made a profession of faith in Christ. Maybe you went forward at an altar call. And even if you don't belong to Christ through baptism, you belong to him because he made you. You belong to Christ - even when you don't want to. And if you belong to Christ you're going to hear his voice. And when you mess up, he'll keep calling you, "Come home! Wash up! I've prepared a table for you. Come and eat." When you hear, follow him. Amen.

Merciful God, you call us by name and promise your constant love to each of us. Watch over each one of us. Deepen our understanding of the gospel. Strengthen our commitment to follow Christ. Keep us in the faith and communion of your church. Increase our compassion for others. Send us into the world to witness to your love. Bring us all to the fullness of your peace and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.