

## He Calls Us By Name

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday of Easter, <sup>April 25</sup> May 2, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10.

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

Jesus said, "He (that is, the good shepherd) calls his own sheep by name". I want to tell you why that verse means so much to me. To do this I need to share three scenes from my life.

Scene One. I'm a little boy and my sister, Mary, is teasing me as older brothers and sisters are want to do. She's telling me that I'm a mistake. I was never intended to be. My father was 51 years old when I was born and my mother was 44. I came along fourteen years after their third child and twenty six years after their first child. "Let's face it, Ted. You're an accident," my sister says. I get angry and try to fight back the tears. But my mom takes me aside and says, "You're not a mistake. You're not an accident. You're name is *Theodore*. *Theodore* means *Gift from God*. You're God's gift to us in our old age." And when she laughed I knew it was true. I knew I wasn't an accident. I knew I had a special place in her heart. Our names mean something. And when Christ says, "He calls his own sheep by name" he means we're not an accident. We're a gift from God.

Scene two takes place in the summer of 1950. I'm about 6 years old. My dad is pushing sixty. It's a warm summer afternoon and my dad says, "Do you want to go to work with me tonight?" I jumped at every chance to go to work with him. He was a railroad engineer. When I went to work with him he'd put his engineer cap on my head and lift me up into the big steam engines and tell me how many box cars it could pull. He'd take me through the giant GG1 electric engine, the fastest on the Pennsylvania

Railroad. It was like neeven to go to work with him. His work began at the round house outside Wilmington where the trains were made up. When we got there, burly fireman and engineers with grease and oil on their overalls, hands, and faces surrounded us. "Is this your grandson?" they'd say. And he'd smile and say, "No, he's *my* boy." "What's his name?" He'd beam proudly and say, "Teddy. His name's *Teddy*." I knew he was proud of me, not because of anything that I'd done but simply because I belonged to him. When Jesus says that the Good Shepherd calls *his own* sheep by name it means that God loves us - is proud of us - not because of what we've accomplished - but solely because we belong to him.

Scene three. I'm a freshman in college, home for Christmas vacation. I've been away for almost four months. My dad is 69 years old and in the last stages of Alzheimer's disease. His memory has been slipping away for about five years. He forgets faces. He forgets names. My mom walks me to their bedroom and says, "Look who's home, Clarence. It's Teddy. Teddy's home. Say hello to Teddy." And he looks at me with a vacant stare and says nothing. He doesn't know me. He doesn't remember my name. He doesn't know who I am.

Do you know what that feels like? I began to descend into a time of doubt and dark depression from which I didn't fully emerge for several years. "Is God like that?" I began to wonder. "Does the God I call 'our Father in heaven', know my name? Does God sit up there in heaven and look down on this world with the vacant stare of an old man who has forgotten the names of his children?" But from time to time, I heard the voice of Jesus say, "I call my sheep by name. I will never forget your name. I will never forget who you are. I will never forget that you belong to me. No matter

Social Security number, a Mac card number, a phone number, a statistic. And each time we're reduced to a number we become a little less human. Our names make us human. Elie Wiesel described his experiences in Auschwitz during World War 2 and how the SS soldiers first reduced the prisoners to numbers before they killed them. In the afternoon of the first day in the concentration camp, Wiesel writes, "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, reduce him to a number, and it's not so hard to hate, to persecute, to torture and to kill.

Without a name, we're only a thing. Have you ever tried to call a hospital to straighten out a medical bill. They don't want your name. They want your number. It's easy, sometimes, to see humanity as simply a large collection of cells. Dr. Paul Tournier, a Swiss Psychiatrist, tells a story in one of his books about his psychiatrist friend, Dr. Plattner, who did a lot of abortion counseling. One particular woman came to him for counseling. The doctor sensed that this woman felt that she really had no choice but to abort. She often referred to the child she had conceived as a "little collection of cells". In order to try to understand this woman's true feelings of what she wanted to do, Dr. Plattner, asked her, "What name would you give to this child if it were to be born?" At once, he said, the atmosphere of the conversation changed. The woman was silent: one felt that the child, as soon as she gave him a name in her own mind, ceased to be a "little collection of cells" and became a person. "It was staggering", Dr. Plattner said. "I felt as if I had 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, out playing after school, I'd sometimes hear my mother calling me home, "Te---ddy, Te---ddy!" She kind of sang my name when she called me. She started out on a high note and then her voice fell on the second syllable. The first note of the syllable was held, sometimes, for four or five seconds. "Te---ddy!" I might be a quarter mile away in the cow field on Woodward's farm playing baseball and I could hear her voice calling me. I might be nearly a half mile away down in the woods behind Truby's house and I could still hear her. I can still hear her voice echoing down the years. There might be a million other boys named Ted but I could always recognize my mother's voice. And when I heard her call my name I knew it was time to come home, wash up and sit down to dinner.

God is like my mother. God prepares a table before us and calls us by name, calls us home. Out there in the world wolves attack us, enemies surround us, but in Christ's sheepfold there is safety and in the House of the Lord there is mercy. We hear many other voices calling us. Sometimes those other voices almost drown out the voice of Christ. But if we belong to Jesus Christ and are grounded in his Word and surrounded by his family, when we hear those other siren voices, something inside of us tells us: That's not true. That's not what Jesus says. That's not the way Jesus talks. That's not what he teaches. That's not where he leads. That's not what Jesus wants me to do.

I have a friend who tells me that when he use to go out on a Friday night date as a teenager his father would place his two hands on his shoulders and look him straight

in the eye and say, "Remember, John, you belong to Christ." "That really irritated me," he said. "It would really put a damper on my plans and desires sometimes. At midnight when I was with my date and faced with the decision as to what do, I'd hear my dad's voice, 'Remember, John, you belong to Christ.' Sometimes", he said, "I didn't want to belong to Christ. I didn't want to hear his voice. I didn't want to follow him. I wanted to belong to myself. I wanted to do my own thing. I wanted to do what I wanted. But I could always hear his voice and when I followed I was spared a lot of trouble, grief, and heartache."

If we belong to Christ, we hear his voice and follow him.

Finally, Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly. I didn't come just to protect you from wolves. I'm here to give you life; to make you to lie down in green pastures; to lead you beside still waters; to restore your soul. I've come to lead you in paths of righteousness for my name's sake. And to go with you through the valley of shadow of death. I've prepared a table for you in the presence of your enemies. I've come to anoint your head with oil. Follow me! Follow me! I've come to give you life. Follow me and surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life and you shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Amen.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you sent Jesus, our good shepherd, to gather us together: May we not wander from his flock, but follow wherever he leads us, listening for his voice and staying near him, until we are safely in your fold, to live with you forever; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.