

## HE CALLS US BY NAME

Psalm 23; John 10:1-18

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at Nottingham Presbyterian Church for the Installation of the Rev. Wayne Lutz  
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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 verse means so much to me. I'll tell you why. To tell you, I need to share four scenes from my life. Scene one. It's Easter Sunday, 1945. I'm eight months old. My parents stand before the baptismal font. The minister asks, "What is the Christian name of your child?" "Theodore." The minister takes me in his arms. "Theodore, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." When I get older I ask my parents what my baptism meant. They say, "When you were baptized Jesus called you by name. You belong to him." In our baptism, God has called us all by name.

Scene two. I'm four years old. My sister is 18 years old. She has to baby-sit me. "You know why you're named *Theodore*? Because you stink. Look how your name's spelled. *T-H-E, The. O-D-O-R, odor. The odor.* Not only that, you're an accident. My father was 51 and my mother, 44, when I was born so I *must* be an accident. When mom came home she assures me that I am no accident. I am a gift. *Theodore* means *God's gift*. Names mean something. And when Christ calls us by name it means that we're no accident. It's no accident you called Wayne to this church. He's God's gift to the Nottingham Presbyterian Church.

Scene three. I'm 6 years old. My dad's almost 60. He says, "Come to work with me tonight?" It was heaven to go to work with dad because 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, carrying oil cans, came out to meet us. "Is this your grandson?" Dad would laugh and say, "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 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 and come home for Christmas. Mom greets me at the door. She calls upstairs to my dad, "Teddy's home." I go up to see dad. He's lying in bed. Dad looks at me

with a vacant stare. He doesn't know who I am. 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 my dad?" Does God look down from heaven with the vacant stare of an old man who forgets the names of his children? I remember reading, at that time, Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*. Camus spoke of "the benign indifference of the universe." I wondered if God was benignly indifferent to us? And yet, despite my questions, I could never escape Christ's voice calling me by name, "You belong to me." My hope is built on the truth of his words. If his words aren't true, if we don't belong to Christ life simply has no meaning for me."

Christ calls each one of us by name. You've called Wayne to be your pastor but Christ has first called you. You're not a number with God. He calls you by name.

A man traveling in India met a shepherd on a dusty back road. "How many sheep do you have?" The shepherd said, "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 each by name. If one doesn't respond I know it's lost and I go look 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 Wayne and Linda and Rebecca and Pamela and Steven. He calls you by name.

You're one of about 125 members of Nottingham Presbyterian Church but you aren't a number to God. So many forces try to reduce us to a number, a Social security number, a Fax number, a Mac Card number, a phone number, a serial number, a statistic. Each time we're reduced to a number we become less human. Elie Wiesel spent his teenage years in Auschwitz during World War 2. The first thing the SS soldiers did when he entered the death camp was reduce him to a number. 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." Wiesel's entire

family died in Auschwitz. 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.

Without a name, we're only things. I hate to be treated like a thing. Ever been on an elevator filled with strangers? Everybody looks at the floor and avoids eye contact. I hate that! I visited a man in a hospital. I took an elevator to the fifth floor. I was the only one on the elevator. At the second floor a couple got in. They pressed the button for 6<sup>th</sup> floor. I smiled at them and said, "Hi, my name's Ted. What's yours?" They looked terrified, said nothing, and got off on the next floor. I hate treating people like things. I like to call people by name.

It's easy in our society to see humanity as simply a large collection of cells and forget they have names. Paul Tournier, wrote of a woman who came to her pastor about a problem pregnancy. She felt she had no choice but abortion. She referred to her unborn child as a "little collection of cells." After talking for a while her minister asked, "What name would you give your baby if born?" At once the atmosphere changed. The woman fell silent. As soon as she named the child it ceased to be a "little collection of cells" and became a person. "It was staggering," the minister said. "I felt as if I'd been present at an act of creation." God looks down at the Nottingham Presbyterian Church and sees, not a collection of 125 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 me, "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 was held, sometimes, for two or three seconds. "Te---ddy!" I might be a quarter mile away in the cow field playing baseball but I could hear her voice calling me. I might be a half mile away down in the woods sneaking a forbidden cigarette and her voice would strike terror in me. 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 mom's voice. And when I heard her call my name I knew it was time to come home for dinner.

Wherever we go and whatever we do God is like our mom calling us by name. "Come home. It's supper time." You may have drifted away the church over the last several years. You may be here because a

friend invited you. Christ is present and he's calling you by name to follow him. He's not only calling Wayne; he's calling each and everyone of us by name. Come home. I have prepared a table for you. Out there in the world wolves are going to attack you. Enemies will surround you. But in Christ's sheepfold there's safety and in the House of the Lord there's mercy. We hear many voices calling us, calling us to do this and try that, calling us to do things we know we shouldn't do. Sometimes those other voices are louder than the voice of Christ. But when we belong to Christ something inside will tell us, "That's not what Jesus wants me to do."

So - remember to whom you belong. You may belong to the Presbytery of Donegal. You may belong to the Nottingham Presbyterian Church. You may belong to the Republican or Democratic party. You may belong to the Lions, the Kiwanis, the Masons, or Eastern Star. But above all you belong to Christ. I think of my sons. When they were younger, going out at night, I'd put my arms around them, hug them and say, "Remember to whom you belong!" That really irritated them sometimes. Sometimes they didn't want to belong to Christ. They wanted to belong to themselves and do their own thing and be their own person. But, hopefully, they'll never forget that they belong to Christ.

All of you belong to Christ. Never forget. Christ has claimed us in baptism. We belong to Christ even when we don't want to. And Christ has other sheep. He calls them too, through us. If we belong to Christ we're going to hear his voice. We're going to want to listen for his voice. We'll follow him tonight, next week, and for the rest of our lives. And when we mess up as individuals or as a church, he'll keep calling us by name, "Come home! Wash up! I have prepared a table for you." Amen.

Merciful god, you call us by name and promise to each of us your constant love. Watch over this congregation and presbytery. 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 grace and love. Bring us all to the fullness of your peace and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.