

CHRIST CALLS US BY NAME

Isaiah 43:1-3a; Psalm 23; John 10:1-11

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at the 2002 Oxford High School Baccalaureate Service
June 2, 2002

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

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls his own sheep by name. Four scenes from my life will tell you why Christ's words mean so much to me. Scene one: Easter Sunday, 1945. I'm a baby. 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, pours water over my head and says, "Theodore, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." When I'm older I ask mom what my baptism means. "Jesus named you. You belong to Jesus."

Scene two: Four years old. My sister's about to graduate from high school and just loves to baby sit her baby brother. "You know why you're named *Theodore*? Because you stink. Look how your name's spelt. *T-H-E* (The) *O-D-O R* (odor). The odor! You stink! Not only that, you're just an accident." Mom comes to the rescue. "Your name means God's gift and you're no accident." Names mean something. And when Christ calls you by name it means you're no accident. You're a gift from God.

Scene three: Six years old. My dad's almost 60. He asks, "Want to go to work with me?" It was heaven to go to work with dad, a railroad engineer. We'd go to the round house where the trains were made up. Big, burly firemen and engineers covered with grease came out to greet us. "Is this your grandson?" they'd ask. Dad would laugh. "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 you by name it means that he loves you, not because of what you've accomplished but simply because you belong to him.

Scene four: I'm eighteen. I graduated from high school, left home and didn't come home 'til Christmas. Mom greets me at the door and says to my 70-year-old dad, "Teddy's home." Dad looks at

me with a vacant stare. He doesn't call me by name; doesn't know my name; doesn't know I belong to him. Alzheimer's disease. I began to wonder, "Is God like my dad? Does God look down at us from heaven with the vacant stare of an old man who forgets his children's names? At that time I was reading Albert Camus's, *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, "Ted, I will never forget you belong to me." My hope is built on the truth of his words. If Christ's words aren't true, if I don't belong to Christ and he doesn't know my name life has no meaning for me.

And you graduates – Christ calls you by name. You belong to him. Life lies before you like a dream and 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. 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 respond 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." Jesus is a shepherd. Ask Christ, "How many children do you have?" and he says, "I don't know. They're more in number than the sand of the sea and the stars in the sky. I don't know how many but I know each by name." The Lord Jesus Christ doesn't love humankind in general. Christ loves Megan, Christie, Chase, Cheyne, Melinda, Ashley, James. He calls you by name not by number.

You're one of 165 graduates but you aren't a number to Christ. Next Friday, Victoria Henneke will call your name to receive your diploma. When she calls your name let it remind you that Christ calls you by name and will continue to call throughout your life. So many forces try to reduce you to a number; a Social Security number, a Mac card number, a phone number, a serial number, a statistic. Each time you're reduced to a number you become less human. Jewish Nobel Peace prizewinner, Elie Wiesel, spent his teenage years in a Nazi death camp during WW2. The first thing the SS soldiers did

when he came into Auschwitz was reduce him to a number. On his first day, 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 "Nigger", "Wop", or "Fag".

Without a name, you're only a thing. I hate to be treated like a thing. Have you ever been on an elevator filled with strangers? Everybody looks at the floor and avoids eye contact as though the other people in the elevator were things. I hate that! I visited a man in a hospital. I took an elevator to his floor. I was the only one in the elevator. At the second floor a couple got in. They pressed the button for the 5th floor. I said, "Hi, my name's Ted. What's yours?" They looked terrified. They moved as far from me as they could and got off on the next floor. I hate treating people like things. I want to know people's names. I want to call them by name. It's easy in our society to see humanity as simply a large collection of cells and forget they have names. I think of a woman who came to a Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier, about a problem pregnancy. She referred to her unborn child as a "little collection of cells." "You have a choice. What do you want to do?" She thought. Finally, she spoke. "I've been thinking about names." At once the atmosphere changed. As soon as she named the child it ceased to be a "little collection of cells" and became a person. "It was staggering," Dr. Tournier wrote. "I felt as if I'd been present at an act of creation." The Risen Christ looks at you graduates 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 me. She'd stand on the porch steps and call me. "Te---ddy, Te---ddy!" She kind of sang my name when she called. She started out on a high note. 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 or a half-mile away down in the woods but I could hear her calling 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.

God is like a mom. Wherever you go and whatever you do in life God is like your mom calling you by name. "Come home. It's supper time." You may be serving your country overseas. You may be far away in college. You may be far away and lonely. You may be in a palace or you may be lying in a gutter. But, if you belong to Christ, you'll recognize his voice calling you by name to come home. He has prepared a table for you. Out there in the world wolves are waiting 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. You're going to hear a lot of voices calling you. Some who don't even know you will call you by name. "Do this! Try that!" Be wary! Sometimes those voices will be louder than the voice of Christ. But if you belong to Christ something inside will tell you, "That's not what Jesus wants me to do."

Remember who you are. Remember to whom you belong. I have three sons. If one went out at night during their high school years I'd put my hands on their shoulder, look him straight in the eye and say, "Remember to whom you belong!" That really irritated him. Sometimes he didn't want to belong to Christ. He wanted to belong to himself. He wanted to be his own person and do his own thing. But, hopefully, they'll never forget that they belong to Christ. All of you belong to Christ through creation. My guess is that Christ also claimed many of you in baptism. You belong to Christ even when you don't want to. And if you belong to Christ you're going to hear his voice. You're going to hear the Risen Christ calling you by name to follow him tonight, next week, this summer, and for the rest of your life. And when you mess up, he'll keep calling you, "Come home! Wash up! I have a meal of bread and wine prepared for you."

Merciful God, you call us by name and promise to each of us your constant love. Watch over these graduates. Deepen their understanding of the gospel. Strengthen their commitment to follow Christ. Keep them in the faith and communion of your church. Increase their compassion for others. Send them into the world to witness to your love. Bring them to the fullness of your peace and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all glory and praise, both now and forevermore. Amen.