

**Fourth Sunday of Easter — RCL, Year A**  
**Psalm 23; John 10:1-10**

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There was a television show a few years back, called Cheers. It was a very popular sitcom about a bar in Boston. One of the characters, every time he came down the stairs to the bar, was always greeted by the whole room with “Norm!” (Which is Yankee for “Norm.”) Every person would stop their conversation, turn, and shout his name. He’d wave sheepishly every time and go find his seat at the bar. From the earliest episodes, this pattern was a short-hand way to say this character is a beloved regular with this crowd. If you remember only one character’s name from the whole run of this show, it will be “Norm!”

There is something powerful in a name. Each of us probably knows exactly why our names were given to us. You may have been named for a beloved relative or friend of your parents to honor them. Some get their names because their Mom was a fan of a movie star. Some babies carry names which their parents will hope help them fit in with their peers or reflect hopes for a life well lived or for individuality. I read a novel recently in which the three protagonist sisters were named by their father, a distinguished English professor. They each carried names from Shakespeare’s play, *King Lear*. By the nature of these characters names and the nature of that particular play, the reader knows they are in for an exciting read.

Names tell a story about us ethnically, culturally, and regionally. It can be very disorienting to find yourself in a place where no one can pronounce your name. When we lived in Tanzania, it became quickly apparent that my family’s Scotch-English names were nearly unpronounceable to the Swahili speakers. I realized my adult students spent their first weeks of the semester thinking my name was “Lazy.” They all stuck strictly to calling me “Teacher” until one young priest was brave enough to come and ask me about my name. My husband Kirk was affectionately known around campus as *keki*, the Swahili word for cake. Kirk was just completely unpronounceable. *Keki* was fine with him.

When you hear your name pronounced correctly, the way you knew it when you were growing up, with the voice of someone who knows you best and loves you – there is no better feeling, no stronger way to feel “home.” Your Grandmother’s voice calling you into her home for fresh baked cookies and a tall cold glass of milk; your mother cooing your name as she wiped your tears and sprayed bactine on your scraped knee; your father’s voice at the other end of the telephone line long distance; your sister saying your name in such a way that you just know she is teasing you even after all the years you’ve been adults.

Jesus calls you – calls your very name with that kind of voice. Jesus said “...The sheep hear the [shepherd’s] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” I want you to hold that thought closely. Imagine such a voice calling you by your name. You will know that voice. When Jesus says your name it will sound in your ear clearly and it will be more familiar than any other voice in your life. Jesus spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd because he knows exactly what direction to lead his flock. When we hear his voice we will follow. If a few of us stray off the path, Jesus will call us back to him.

The passage from St. John’s Gospel which we heard today is what I felt was Jesus’ point of view of the situation, how he describes his role in God’s will for us. HE is the Good Shepherd, he is the one who calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. HE brings “out all his own”, and “goes ahead.” He said “I am the gate...Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” This is what Jesus had to say about himself as the Good Shepherd – he came to lead us in to abundant life.

This is where Psalm 23 comes into view for me – it is the perspective of the sheep, our perspective of what the abundant life in God and with the Good Shepherd is like. There is no want, no fear. With the Good Shepherd

we are led to the green pastures and still waters. Our souls are revived, there is a table laid out before us, plenty for all, we find comfort. In the midst of this abundance, we are anointed by the Lord. To anoint is to “ceremonially confer divine or holy office upon (a priest or monarch) by smearing or rubbing with oil. Synonyms include consecrate, bless, or ordain. Our cup of life literally overflows with blessing – we are made holy in its extravagance. I often think that the phrase, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” is to be understood as a sigh of complete contentment.

What takes away us from that path to abundant life? What other shepherd could possibly take our attention from the promise of such contentment? In the Gospel reading, Jesus warns about the bandit and the thief who try to enter the fold by means other than through the gate. There are thieves and bandits who would like us to follow them to places that may try to approximate the feeling of plenty and vision of green pastures. I read recently that advertisers used to sell products touting their quality and how they helped make our work easier. There has been a shift in tone to this idea of “life style.” An episode from the PBS documentary series, *Frontline*, entitled “The Persuaders,” is about the changing nature of advertising and our culture, and it gives evidence of how keenly we seek a sense of fulfillment and purpose -- that is, abundant life -- often from the things we buy. (From David Lose, *Dear Working Preacher, John 10:1-10*)

There are perfectly useful and even necessary items we need in today’s world, like laptops and cars, but they cannot bring us the abundant life they tout in their commercials. That vision of us being satisfied by people ogling us as we drive by in our new car, or of being satisfied because we are hip at the coffee shop with our new tablet computer, is only a shadow of what true, authentic abundant life is. It might be a good exercise for each of us to consider the areas of our life where we sense a “lacking.” Have you been able to fill that void with what you eat, wear, or drive? I once heard that suicide is more common in rich neighborhoods. There is certainly abundance in that kind of wealth, abundance of clothing, food, entertainment, etc. But that is not the kind of abundance that brings the deep joy that our Good Shepherd has prepared for us. There is a danger in having it all but feeling none of it because one doesn’t have love in abundance.

That is what we crave. Our human nature is that we seek to be known and loved. We are wired that way and the thieves and bandits know it. They use their crafts to grab our attention en masse, the whole herd, and displace the beloved voice of Christ. Jesus said, “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” They want our money in exchange for the vision of abundance they sell: power, abundance of shiny stuff, desire. The side effect is you find that despite your purchases, you are left with the feeling that you are lacking something – perhaps we feel even emptier than before.

Jesus is the only one who will call you by name. It is deeply personal. We are each seen and known by Jesus as individuals. When he calls us each by name, he speaks to our heart and fills it with the knowledge that we are the beloved. Our Good Shepherd leads us to wholeness and health and comfort. Have you known that kind of love in your grandmother’s kitchen? Have you known it in your mother’s soothing touch? Did your father’s concern for you warm your heart even across the miles?

Those beautiful moments are a sharing of the love of God for his children. It is that kind of love that satisfies our deepest desire to be known and loved. When you hear the Son, the one who came to do God’s will, call your name, that share becomes the whole, all of that kind of love, so that “you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Amen.