

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 21, 2013
Easter 4/Good Shepherd Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 13:15-39
Psalm 100
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

We find ourselves now not only in the season of Spring, with it's beautiful and unpredictable weather -- but we also find ourselves in the midst of another season, a time that can generate as much anxiety and uncertainty as the spring weather. The season to which I refer of course is.....income tax season!

Most of us have long since filled out the forms, which can become an endless stream of numbers. As I thought about it this week, a question came to my mind: In our technology-driven world, do you ever wonder whether your life and identity are sometimes reduced to a stream of impersonal numbers?

Consider for a moment how numbers can impact our life and shape our identity. The government knows you by your social security number. The state knows you by your driver's license number. The bank knows you by your account number. Your insurance company knows you by your policy number.

Earlier this week, Esther Wesche told of a recent experience where she had to have a medical procedure done at a large hospital in Seattle. Her husband, Lilburn, went to the surgery waiting room to wait. Esther said there was an

electronic sign mounted high on the wall, and when a person was being taken back for a surgery or a procedure, the sign would light up with the message: “Number _____ is now entering surgery. A nurse will make contact in 20 minutes.”

In terms of technology, we seem to live in a golden age. Nevertheless, I sometimes wonder whether anyone knows me at all without a *number* to identify me.

But then I pause and remember something. There *is* someone who knows me. Someone who knows me, not by a number, but by my *name*.

And in case you may have forgotten, He knows *you* personally as well. He knows you intimately. He knows the burdens you carried with you as you walked through these doors this morning. He knows you so well that he laid down his life for your sake.

The psalm writer said, “we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.” Jesus says, “my sheep hear my voice; I *know* them, and they follow me.”

Whatever else Christianity may be, it is about the comforting reality that in a cold and impersonal world, *we are intimately known*. We are deeply known and loved, warts and scars and vulnerabilities and all. We are known, we are loved, and we are enfolded in *relationship*. And that relationship operates not from the flow of impersonal numbers, but from the sound of a *voice*.

Historian G.A. Smith tells a story of watching shepherds with their sheep one day in the Judean countryside. He says:

Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells to which three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed together with each other, and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own [flock] again. But after the watering and the playing were over, the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley, and each called out his peculiar call. And the sheep of each drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd. (G.A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, p. 210-211).

Smith's experience on that hillside resonates with what Jesus says in our Gospel lesson this morning. We often have romantic notions of the shepherd guiding the flock, but the countryside around Jerusalem where Jesus would have painted this word picture, and where the Psalmist would have sung his song, was dry, dangerous, and dreary. The rocky soil was a haven for hungry wolves and a natural trap for unsteady sheep. Steep cliffs fell precipitously to the Dead Sea below.

As a result, shepherds with their staves of comfort and rods of rescue had to be vigilant, courageous, tender, and tough. They had to work at *intentionally knowing their sheep*, and making sure their sheep knew them.

It was the shepherd's *voice* that built this relationship. It was the shepherd's *voice* that shaped and protected and nurtured the flock. It was the shepherd's *voice* that drew the lost, the scared, and the wounded sheep back home.

It's not surprising, then, that our collect for today is framed in these words: "O God, whose son Jesus is the Good Shepherd of your people: grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads."

Whatever else Christian faith may be, at its heart it involves placing yourself in a position to hear Jesus' voice, and then following him when he calls you. And I assure you, when he calls you, he will call you by your *name*, not your social security number.

I would suggest to you this morning that one of the best places you can nurture your relationship with Jesus and listen to his voice is at the Lord's Table. At Christ's table we are nurtured, we are loved, we are fed, we are cared for. At his table we are known and loved intimately. At his table we learn the lesson that Saul of Tarsus learned, namely, that life doesn't consist so much in finding Jesus as in *being found* by him.

And the result of knowing Jesus and hearing his voice comes to us near the end of our Gospel lesson, where Jesus says: "and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (v. 28).

When our work on earth is ended, I have a theory about how we will be welcomed to heaven. Jesus will not say to you: "well done, number 404-66-2922." No.

Jesus will say to you: “Welcome home, *[Name]*. We’ve been expecting you.” He will call you by name then, even as he knows you by name now.

In just a few moments, you will be invited to the Lord’s table. I remind you this morning that your invitation is not an impersonal one, like you would get on a form letter: “Dear policyholder,” or “Dear account holder.” Your invitation was crafted personally for you by the One who meets you here. Your invitation has Jesus’ signature on it, not made by a rubber stamp, but signed personally – with drops of crimson ink.

In a cold, impersonal world, to be known like that is a gift beyond words or price.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.