

Sunday, April 22, 2018  
 John 10:7b-18  
 One Who Really Knows You  
 Michael Stanfield

‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 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.

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’ *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but your word, O Lord, stands forever. For this we give you thanks. Amen.*

A prosecuting attorney called his first witness, a grandmotherly woman, to the stand. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She responded: “Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a rising big shot when you haven’t the brains to realize you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do, he pointed across the room and asked “And Mrs. Williams, do you know the defense attorney?”

Again she replied: “Why, yes, I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. I used to baby-sit him for his parents. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted and has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.”

At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said with menace, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, I’ll jail you for contempt!”<sup>i</sup>

The gospel text from John speaks to being known – and specifically what a difference it makes as to who it is that really knows you – a hired hand, someone on the periphery, who really

doesn't care about you – like the woman in the courtroom – or the Good Shepherd and his servants who really have your best interest at heart.

The question of who we really are is complex and often elusive even to ourselves – much less to others. Even among those we think *we* know well – and who we would say know *us* well, we are often nothing more than blind men holding onto only one part of the elephant. The way we experience one another is absolutely true and yet it doesn't come close to painting the whole picture.

The woman I know as “Mom” and the man I know as “Dad” are in varying degrees, different from the woman or the man that my siblings know. I have shared certain experiences with my parents that my siblings haven't. I therefore see things about them that the others may not. Conversely, the person I am in the eyes of my parents, who would love me no matter what heinous crime I might commit, is different from that of my siblings and especially from anyone outside of the family.

And yet I do believe that there are qualities each of us possesses that tend to be consistent no matter what – a sense of humor for example, or hypersensitivity to the feelings of others, or the propensity to analyze almost everything. No matter the situation, you can always count on these characteristics making themselves known in some way.

A human quality that is lifted up as quintessential in our morning text is that of Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness. It is that characteristic that encompasses *more* than a single trait. Trustworthiness. It is that rare quality possessed of those who care for us deeply, understand us and our situation completely, and to whom we can turn with absolute confidence when the chips are down. In fact, Jesus tells us that is him.

And in the text, he cautions us about those in whom we would place our deepest trust – those to whom we might pledge our greatest allegiance. When Jesus says, “All who came before me are thieves and bandits” and “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them,” who is he talking about?

He is talking about the established religious leaders of Judaism going back centuries. Jesus is speaking to crowds hungry for a real spiritual connection to God, but for whom the religion of his day has failed miserably. These are the ones for whom God seems inaccessible at best and an exacting ogre at worst. But Jesus knows they have not given up on God. Here they are, still searching, still willing to give their lives to anyone or any thing that might settle their deepest existential angst – their deep need for spiritual connection to something real.

And make no mistake: it is these disenfranchised but God-oriented Jews who are the ones Jesus calls his true sheep – along with yet other sheep not of this Jewish flock – that is – pagan gentiles who likewise are out there earnestly searching for the living God.

We need to remember that Jesus is not speaking to those who are satisfied with the religious status quo. He is speaking to those who only feel judged by their religion and its leaders – those

who are hardened against their religion as it appears to be practiced – but who are yet open to God – looking for something to which they might give their ultimate trust, but *for* whom the language and the practice of religion has become foreign, irrelevant, and even a kind of affront to their deeper spiritual sensibilities.

I see people like this all the time in the consulting room of therapy – ultra sensitive souls who, in many cases have turned to drugs, alcohol or other substances of choice because they are called to something higher that they no longer seem to find in the church as it exists today. They are people who, at one time entrusted their very souls to a representative or set of representatives from the Church who turned out to be nothing more than a religious hired hands, all too quick to abandon them when real trouble came to them. Or yet others, just as sensitive, who were born to secular parents – parents who could live just fine without a formal connection to a church or a synagogue but who themselves, now feel that lack of a spiritual connection in seemingly irrational fears and anxieties of every kind imaginable.

If you are a visitor, perhaps one of these two descriptions fits you. If you are a long time member, my guess is that you know someone like this –someone who is looking for that spiritual place over the rainbow where skies are blue – something that will settle it for them – somebody some *divine* body that they are assured will be there when the chips are down...

The same is true for every one of us no matter what our orientation to God and religion when calamity strikes.

- the loss of a job
- diagnosis of a cataclysmic illness
- the coming apart of a once happy marriage
- the death of one's child, one's soul mate or one's parent and the list goes on.

At such times, the very foundations upon which we have stood our whole lives seems to be crumbling beneath us. One cannot help but be changed by such a calamity. And the course of this change, for better or for worse, often has to do with *who* responds to us with compassion; *who* drops what they are doing, no matter what it is and steps in to be with us in our pain.

Among the ones who do this and perhaps, as importantly, the ones who don't, there are sometimes surprises. Whether it's justified or not, at times like these, we make a clear distinction between the hired hands in our lives and the real friends of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. And so, we grieve, on the one hand, over the complete absence of certain family members or friends or leaders in the church with whom we had thought we were quite close, and on the other hand, we are filled with humble gratitude over the perfect care given by some individuals who, before the tragedy, had barely been on our radar.

In this way, our life and our relationships are turned upside down.

Usually those who come out of the woodwork to show that perfect compassion are those who have known the same or similar kinds of suffering themselves. If one has managed to avoid a lot of suffering oneself – and in middle class America, I do believe that is quite possible – then

entering into the suffering of another becomes *impossible*. Even if, through compassion, such a one has the desire, how well and effective can they be?

It's why Jesus had to suffer death on the cross. God chose to become a human shepherd in Jesus because God concluded that God did not know us well enough. God did not have the divine *experience* (divine knowledge, perhaps, but not the divine experience) to get at the real depths to which humans could sink in their pain and suffering, because God had never been human himself.

And so, God did not know human separation and god-forsakenness in their depths, like us, until these experiences came to be God's *own* in Jesus. In other words, God, wanted to be more than fully equipped to offer the kind of love, the kind of compassion that is required when we suffer. God wanted to do more than comfort us from afar. God wanted to embrace us in our frailty with human hands.

Harold Kushner, the author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" puts it this way: He writes:

"I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work, by the water's edge, building an elaborate sand castle with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand.

I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle.

I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating (like our religious institutions) are built on sand. Only our relationships to others – and especially to God – endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.<sup>ii</sup>

God came in Jesus to be that hand-holder. As Christians, *we* have the hand of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who suffered and died for us, to hold. You and I – we know believe that – we know that; it is settled for us. But there are so many out there who do not believe it – who do not know it – they desperately want to, but they just can't. They have not had an experience that tells them anything different.

The question is: What are we doing to try and understand them? What are we doing to help them experience God's love? What are we doing to dissuade them of their conviction that the church and all who are in it are nothing but shallow hypocrites who don't really care about them and the questions they struggle with?

Jesus would remind us today that the onus is not on them to try and understand us and why the church is important. It is on us to understand them – and to convince them that the church has a place for them as well.

– And when I say “convince” I don’t mean with righteous arguments but with earnest testimonies of God’s love and acts of genuine tenderness. I mean, meeting their understandable skepticism and, even hostility towards the church, with *hokma* rather than with dogma. Yes *Hokma* rather than *Dogma*. *Hokma* is the Hebrew word for Holy wisdom. *Hokma* is knowledge coupled with an inner quality that embodies a heart and life in conformity with the purposes and character of God. *Hokma* comes from the Holy Spirit. It is what allowed the early Christians to respond to religious persecution with powerful personal testimony instead of sterile religious teaching.

In his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Bishop Desmond Tutu wrote about his experience as the chair of his country’s *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Heinous, murderous crimes had been perpetrated by all associated with the Apartheid government in South Africa. To address the atrocities in a way that brought justice but also tried to prevent the victim from becoming the new perpetrator a fine line had to be walked. Amnesty could be given for crimes committed. But there were conditions.

One of those was that a full disclosure had to be made of the role played by the perpetrators. In Tutu’s words the commission worked on the basis that “there was a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* (a Zulu word meaning the essence of what makes one human) but not for victimization.” Tutu explained that they sought testimony from many ordinary people who had been victims. The process, he said, had to be victim-friendly. “These were men and women many had arrogantly dismissed as ‘the ordinary people,’” he wrote. But Tutu explained, “In my theology there are no ordinary people. Each one of us, because we are God’s representative, God’s viceroy, God’s stand-in, and God’s carrier – each one of us is a special person, a VIP far more important and far more universal than your normal earthly VIP.”<sup>iii</sup>

For Christians that Zulu word “Ubuntu” should have special meaning because it is the crucified and risen Christ dwelling within each of us that makes us human in a special way. If we already know Christ we are new creations and daily we carry Christ to our friends, neighbors and everyone we meet to remind them that they are of the fold as well. So is that what we are doing? And if not, why not?

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, There are many hired hands in this world today – those who claim to know your father but who do not and instead run at the first sign of trouble. But most us here today know and have known the true shepherd, your son. Light a fire under us so that we understand you will not rest until all of your sheep are within the fold. Make us your shepherds crook helping us to love the lost back home. We pray these things in your name, Amen.

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<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Harold S. Hushner, quoted in *Kindred Spirits: Meditations on Family and Friends*, eds. Claudia Karabaic Sargent and Peg Street (Viking Studio Books, 1995).

<sup>iii</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, (New York, N.Y.: First Image Books-Doubleday, 1999).