

He Even Calls Me by My Name

John 10:1-10 (CSB)

¹ "Truly I tell you, anyone who doesn't enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought all his own outside, he goes ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will never follow a stranger; instead they will run away from him, because they don't know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus gave them this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. ⁷ Jesus said again, "Truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn't listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." That's probably the most famous quote from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The point of Juliet's dialogue is to show how irrational it is to hate someone just because they belong to a certain family or bloodline, as Juliet's father is wont to hate Romeo since Romeo is a Montague while he and his daughter Juliet are Capulets. What's really in a name? Even if you called someone by a different name, wouldn't they still be the same person? Then I think of a Simpsons quote (basically the complete opposite of Shakespeare) and remember when Lisa quoted this famous line "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," and then her brother, Bart, wittily responded, "Not if you call them stenchblossoms."

The name by which things and people are called matters. Doesn't it annoy you just a bit when Starbucks totally butchers your name on your drink order or when the customer service rep pronounces your name in such an unrecognizable way that you aren't even sure if they are talking to you? Personally, I notice this most when people call me "Jonathan" instead of "Jon." When they use my formal first name, I know that they don't know me well enough to use my preferred first name. When the wrong name is used, the connection between people weakens, the interaction becomes less personable, and you may even wonder if the person knows anything about you.

What's in a name? Quite a bit, actually. If you go around calling people by other names or even "Hey, you!", you will get different reactions or you may get no reaction at all because they don't know who you're addressing. When you use someone's name, you are setting the tone of the conversation and the relationship you have with that person. The name you use to address someone will show how well you know them.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus begins building a figure of speech about sheep, sheep pens, shepherds, and the like. Jesus had just healed an adult man who had been born blind, but he did this on the Sabbath day, the Jewish day of rest and worship. This infuriated the Pharisees, a strict sect of the Jewish faith. They had denounced Jesus for doing this miracle and had tried to even convince the man whom Jesus had healed that Jesus was a sinner. The Pharisees, who should have been promoting Jesus and supporting him and worshipping him as their God were trying to make sure that people didn't believe in him. They were trying to steal Jesus' sheep.

This is why Jesus starts out by saying, "Truly I tell you, anyone who doesn't enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber." (verse 1) Anyone can recognize a thief or robber. They don't try to get in to the sheep pen legitimately. They have to do it in secret, but their intention is only to take sheep away from the shepherd. Jesus tells us, "A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." (verse 10) They are not coming to get wealth for themselves. They aren't coming to get food. They are sneaking into the sheep pen purely to deprive the shepherd of his sheep.

The thieves and robbers are at a very big disadvantage. They don't know the sheep. They don't know the sheep's names. You can picture them as they try to coax the sheep towards them. "Come here, little sheep." "Here sheeepy, sheeepy, sheeepy." "I got a treat for you." "Come on over this way, sheep." There's no prior connection, no relationship that the sheep should trust these strangers.

Now, when Jesus gave the Pharisees this figure of speech, they did not understand it. Jesus was referring to them, to these people who should be trying to protect the sheep and keep them with the shepherd, but instead they were intent on destroying the sheep that belonged to the shepherd, as they wanted to get rid of this formerly blind man who wanted to follow Jesus, his shepherd. They wanted to see this man robbed of his faith and destroyed by being condemned to hell instead of entrusted to Jesus.

Who are the thieves and robbers who try to steal us away from our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ? Is it a person from another religion, another faith, someone who tries to gently coax you away from God and His Word, away from your church? Do they appeal to you with promises of how their church or their philosophy is better, has more to offer? Do they appeal to your emotions, that you will feel better at their church so that must make it the right church? Could the thief or robber be someone within our own family, someone who scoffs at your faith, pokes fun at it, who makes it hard for you to go to church on Sunday mornings by giving you grief for taking time away from them to do this church thing? Are we the thieves and robbers, that the things we do, the things we say, push people away from the Good Shepherd, away from God? Do I make people feel unwelcome, as if they shouldn't be here? Do we sometimes talk ourselves into wandering off, doing something else other than following the voice of our Good Shepherd?

Thieves and robbers in whatever form they take only want to steal, kill, and destroy. They want us to keep us away from our Good Shepherd and lead us instead to our death. We need our Shepherd. We need him to protect us and save us from these thieves and robbers.

Jesus is our Shepherd. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him because he knows the shepherd. The shepherd calls to us, his sheep. He doesn't try to coax us saying, "Here, sheepy, sheepy, sheepy." He doesn't send sheepdogs in to growl and bark and nip at us to get us to come to him. The Bible is not a tool to beat you over the head and into submission to believe in God. No, his Word is here to call to you. Our Good Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." (verse 3) "Jon, Wendy, William, James, come this way." "Eric, Andy, I'll lead you out." "Steve and Gail, I'm here for you." "June & Glen, I'll protect you." "Becky, Mary, Jeanette, Nova, let me take you someplace safe and nice." "Larry and Theresa, follow me. Marlys, Carol, Joyce, I'll lead you to green pastures." "Allan and Alicia, don't be afraid." "I'm here for you, Sue, John, Mark, and Mara."

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls each of his sheep by name, calls each of us by name. Who even takes the time to name sheep? If you have a couple of animals, it makes sense, but we are talking thousands, millions, billions, and more! He calls each and every one of his sheep by name because he knows each and every single one of them that thoroughly, that intimately. He knows them and all the things that they go through. He knows exactly who you are and all the things you go through. He calls you by your name and he gets it right.

At our baptism God put his name on us, he adopted us. When he called us to faith through his voice coming through his Word, he got to know us. We now belong to him. He tells us, "Come, follow me. I will take care of you. I will provide for you. I will rescue you from all these thieves and robbers, those who want to steal, kill, and destroy you. They want to take your life, but I will give you life, life in abundance. I will lead you out of danger and instead take you to safe pasture." By your baptism, by your God-given faith in Jesus, he has become your Good Shepherd. You are a part of God's flock. This moniker is even more important than our own.

Being a part of God's flock, we are more to the Good Shepherd than a means of income, a way of living. He doesn't keep us around for what we give him. No, he shepherds us, serves us, protects us because of what he gives to us: that life in abundance. We have it because our Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep to protect us from all these thieves and robbers who wanted to destroy us. Then he took his life back up again, the wonderful truth that we are still celebrating now in the season of Easter. Our Good Shepherd lives! He has conquered death for us!

Because we belong to Jesus, our Good Shepherd, he guides us, calls us over the tumult, telling us not to listen to those thieves and robbers. Anyone who doesn't know your name, anyone who tries to keep you from following the voice of Jesus, you run away from them. Don't follow them. They will only lead you to your destruction.

We have followed the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, to be here today. He has called you here that you "may have life and have it in abundance." (verse 10) When we enter into his sheep pen, his house, he promises us that we "will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." (verse 9) So, we gladly say...

I am Jesus' little lamb,
Ever glad at heart I am;
For my Shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my need, and well provides me,
Loves me every day the same,
Even calls me by my name. Amen.
(CW 432:1)