

Reflection: Called by Name

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

“If ever I have needed to hear the voice of the shepherd, this is the moment.” I wonder if you have ever thought about the voice of the shepherd of the sheep. Certainly, these days of living through this pandemic gives me pause to listen for the voice of our God with greater intensity. And I know there will be many of you who want to stop me here and let me know you have never heard the voice of the shepherd, never felt the presence of God. And yet, I will argue that hearing God’s voice or feeling God’s presence is less about God speaking to you or offering you such a moment and more about the pace by which we live and our inability to listen for the still small voice of God. But, my friends, that is a sermon for another day. Today, I would share with you the power of hearing your name spoken.

Many of us can speak to moments when our name has been called in frustration or anger. Maybe you grew up in a home where you did not know you were in trouble until your mother used your full name: Christian William Marien. And then your choice was to go find your mom and own your mistake or run for the hills – just so you know – that never happened in my house. Or maybe your name has been spoken in the soft whisper of the voice of someone who loves you more than you could imagine was possible. In either case – your name was spoken in a moment of familiarity and authority. I wonder how you would hear God speak your name. I think a lot of us grew up in churches where we were taught that God always spoke our name with disappointment – we were never good enough; never prayed enough; never knew enough; never gave enough to make this God, who supposedly loved us, happy enough.

It turns out that for too long, too many churches taught of a God who did not love us enough to simply love us. Even after the death and resurrection of Jesus – still too many messages from too many pulpits were about how you were too far gone to be loved. And we see that lie playing out all over the place. Because if we are too far gone to be loved than what does anything else matter – relationships...let them go. Your health...who cares. Promises...break them. And from there – how easy it is to move into one self-destructive behavior or another – I drink to dull the pain. I take meds to escape the hurt. I give myself to others at the first sign of interest without really getting to know them. I yell at someone I love because I really am mad at myself but it is easier to yell at them. No wonder we get confused and miss out on the sound of the voice of God – the great shepherd of the sheep.

I am much more interested in telling you about the tender voice of the God who loves you for who you are right now, in this moment. Because if you can let go of how you think you have not measured up to God’s expectations – if you can wipe away your unworthiness for just a moment and listen to the voice of the One who loves you for all that you were created to be – I imagine the sound of God’s voice speaking your name would sound far more like the whisper of love than the shout of an angry parent.

I wonder how you hear God’s voice call your name. At the baptismal font, I am always humbled to call a newly-baptized person by their name. As I lean a child over the water or bring water up to the forehead of an adult, I am always caught with the importance of the moment. Carson Douglas, Leo William, Madelyn Russell – I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In that moment, I speak the name of the newly-baptized almost as if I am announcing this child of God to God’s very self. Yes, I know God has known this child’s name all along – yet, I am still caught by the tender, sacred moment of announcing this gift of God, by

name, to the world. There are few moments more intimate between pastor and Holy Spirit and a brother or sister in the Kingdom of God than the moment I am invited to speak the name of the newly-baptized – beloved of God.

I read the story this past week, that every once in a while, an ewe will give birth to a lamb and reject it. There are many reasons she may do this. If the lamb is returned to the ewe, the mother may even kick the poor animal away. Once a ewe rejects one of her lambs, she will never change her mind. These little lambs will hang their heads so low that it looks like something is wrong with its neck. Their spirit is broken. These lambs are called “bummer lambs.” Unless the shepherd intervenes, that lamb will die, rejected and alone. So, do you know what the shepherd does? He takes that rejected little one into his home, hand-feeds it and keep it warm by the fire. He will wrap it up with blankets and hold it to his chest so the bummer can hear his heartbeat. Once the lamb is strong enough, the shepherd will place it back in the field with the rest of the flock. But that sheep never forgets how the shepherd cared for him when his mother rejected him. When the shepherd calls for the flock, guess who runs to him first? That is right, the bummer sheep. He knows the shepherd’s voice intimately. It is not that the bummer lamb is loved more, it just knows intimately the one who loves it. It’s not that it is loved more, it just believes it because it has experienced that love one on one. So many of us are bummer lambs, rejected and broken. But the good Shepherd cares for our every need and holds us close to his heart so we can hear the very heartbeat of God. And maybe in such moments, we learn to listen for the tenderness of our God who calls us each by name.

Many of you know I buried my mentor, the pastor who taught me so much about the love of God in my life, a little less than a year ago. His name was John, but I always knew him as Pastor John. From 2nd grade until the day he died last June – he never called me Chris. He always called me by my full name: Christian. He never asked if I was okay with him using my full name. He simply chose to call me by my full name. When I served as an acolyte, at my confirmation, countless high school events, at my graduation from high school and college, and on the day he preached at my ordination into pastoral ministry – he called me Christian. When I heard Pastor John call my name, I imagined that how I felt when he called my name would be how I would feel when I heard God call my name. There was just something in the quality and fondness of his voice. It turns out that Pastor John’s wife, and both of his daughters also choose to use my full name when they call my name. Every time, I am reminded of the gentleness of a voice who calls my name with love.

It is my prayer that in each of your lives, you know someone by the sound of their voice, who calls your name with love – reminding you of the great shepherd of the sheep, who calls each of us bummer lambs by name. Thanks be to God! Amen.