

By Name

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Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10



*Gracious God, grant that we may know the one
who calls us each by name. Amen.*

I was not, at the time, a “dog person.” So, no one was more surprised than I was when on a summer day in 2018, my wife Christine and I walked out of a canine rescue shelter with not one, but two dogs, including Belton, a 6-year-old, 75 lb. pit bull/whippet/retriever mix. I was head over heels.

Then, Belton bit a neighbor. The neighbor was OK, but the bite did break the skin, and when the neighbor wisely sought medical attention, public health authorities were notified, and Belton was placed in quarantine for 10 days.

This was part of a pattern. Belton was loving and affectionate with us, but suspicious and aggressive toward most strangers, other dogs, and cats. He was strong, energetic, and traumatized, so his aggression proved hard to channel. “What had we done?”, we asked ourselves. We considered all our options – we had to. And I started to wonder if I was going to be a dog person after all.

A word about Belton’s name. On the advice of a professional trainer, we kept his “given” name - “Belton” - for consistency and continuity.

Frankly, we needed all the help we could get. So, despite the inevitable questions and mispronunciations, we kept his name.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. So, of course, you are expecting a sermon about shepherds and sheep. But in today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't call himself the Good Shepherd. That comes in the very next verse **after** today's reading ends. Instead, Jesus says something else: "I am the gate."

Amidst the talk of gates, and sheepfolds, thieves, and bandits, one thing stood out to me in this Gospel. The sheep are called out by name. Not as a flock. Not as a category. Not by distinguishing characteristics. By **name**.

Jesus is not delivering this teaching out of nowhere. In chapter 9 of John's Gospel, the chapter just before the one we heard today, Jesus had just healed a man who had been blind from birth. That man received his sight, but it cost him. The religious authorities hauled him in for questioning. They interrogated his parents. And when he wouldn't deny what had happened to him, the Pharisees threw him out.

The religious authorities didn't know the healed man. They didn't want to know him. He was a problem to be managed, not a person to be seen.

What did Jesus do? Jesus went back and found him. Personally. After everyone else had turned away.

That's what "by name" means. It doesn't mean God has a list. It means God comes looking for each of us, especially when everyone

else has decided that we're not worth the trouble. Even when, perhaps, we ourselves have decided we're not worth the trouble.

And yet, being found that way, being **known** that way, isn't safe. It isn't comfortable. It cost the blind man his entire community. But it was **true**.

Which brings us to today's psalm that we know so well. Too well, maybe. We've heard it so many times at bedsides and funerals that the words almost wash over us. But I want us to notice something we may have never noticed before.

Listen to how the psalm begins. "**He** makes me lie down in green pastures. **He** leads me beside still waters. **He** restores my soul."

He. He. He.

God is being **described**. At a distance. In the third person. The psalmist is talking **about** God, the way we might tell someone about a friend they've never met.

And then comes the valley. The darkest valley. And listen to what happens to the language:

"For **you** are with me. **Your** rod and **your** staff, they comfort me. **You** prepare a table before me."

The pronoun changes. Did you catch that? In the green pastures, God is "**he**." In the valley, God becomes "**you**."

Perhaps this is why our time in the valley is given to us. It's not punishment. Not abandonment. The valley is where talking **about**

God becomes talking **to** God. Where “**he**” becomes “**you**”. Where we become **known**.

And then, notice this too, what follows the valley isn't modest, tepid, or unassuming. The table is prepared in the presence of enemies. The cup doesn't just have enough, it **overflows**. The head is anointed with oil. And goodness and mercy don't just follow; the Hebrew word is stronger than that. They **pursue**. Goodness and mercy chase us down.

This is not polite religion, friends. This is lavish, reckless, almost defiant intimacy. And it happens not in the absence of enemies but with them watching.

I think the early church knew what that felt like.

The reading from Acts gives us a snapshot of what happened when a group of ordinary people actually lived as though they were known by name. They devoted themselves to teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread, and to prayer. They shared their possessions. They ate in each other's homes. “*With glad and generous hearts,*” the text says.

This wasn't a program. Nobody designed it. It was what happened when people who had been broken open by the Spirit stopped holding back from each other. They let themselves be known, really known. Their needs, their resources, their tables, their homes, their fears, their dreams.

And people noticed. Outsiders looked at this little community and saw something they wanted to be part of. Because the quality of

their life together was unmistakable. There was something about the way they knew each other, **by name** -- not by status or by role -- that was compelling enough to draw people in.

Now, it was fragile. Luke, who wrote Acts, knew that. It fell apart almost immediately in the chapters that follow. But for a moment, in the wake of resurrection, a group of ordinary people lived as though being known was not a threat but a gift.

Back to Belton...

In the aftermath of the bite, we walked. We walked in the morning, at lunch, in the evenings, on the weekends, in the rain, in the heat and, as the seasons turned, in the snow, sleet, and single-digit temps. We walked in town, along hiking trails, through an abandoned gravel pit near our home. Up one side of October Mountain and down again. Through streams, around boulders, across meadows... We walked, and we walked, and we walked.

So much of this was purely physical, animalistic. But the walks had another benefit, a more emotional, even spiritual dimension. As we walked, Belton was getting to know us, and we were getting to know him.

Belton is now 14. He's slowed down some - dealing with canine dementia and kidney disease, but still eager to warn us of mortal threats like UPS trucks and the black-and-white cat, Oreo, who roams the neighborhood. "Mellow," is never a word that will be used to describe Belton, but after walking through more than one valley, he has found his pasture. And we're grateful we kept his name.

I don't know what valley you're walking through right now. I don't know whose voice you're straining to hear, or whose voice you've stopped trusting, or how long it's been since someone called your name and you felt **known**, not assessed, not managed, not handled, but **known**.

I **do** know that these readings, taken together, make one **audacious** claim: our names are already known. Not because we've earned it. But because that's what this particular shepherd does – comes looking for the one everyone else has given up on and calls us - by name. Amen.