

Being Known And Knowing (Acts 4:5-12; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18)

We live in the modern age with so many ways to communicate: letters; telephones; special delivery; television; radio; cable; dish; faxes; the internet; web cams; twitter. And yet we're really not very good at communicating what's most important—the essence of who we are.

As children, we learn to hide behind a mask. This might be because a parent has told us that we have to “buck up” and be or do something we really aren't or don't want to do. Or, it might be because we were laughed at and hurt when we showed our true selves. Thus, as adults, we don't usually reveal to others our true selves—how insecure we are; how fragile we are; how frightened we are; how unsure of ourselves we are; how depressed we get; how excited we get; how vulnerable we are; what we're really like; what we really want to do. We hold our cards tight. We keep our true selves hidden, unknown, secret. We're masters of evasion, and we do this at the work place, at school, at church, and even at home. We keep people at arm's length. We end up hiding behind so many masks that sometimes we get sucked into the pantomime ourselves, so that we don't even know our true selves.

And oftentimes, we're so busy hiding our insecurities, fears, and shortcomings that we can't take a good look at others to even try to know them for who they really are. As a result, we don't know our neighbors, sometimes even our relatives, very well. In Princeton, New Jersey, there is a legendary tale about the eminent scientist Albert Einstein walking in front of a local inn and being mistaken for a bell boy by a woman who had just arrived in a luxury car. Now, we all know what Albert Einstein looked like, right? But that woman was so wrapped up in herself that she ordered him to carry her luggage into the hotel, and, according to the story, Einstein did so, received a small tip, and then continued on to his office to ponder the mysteries of the universe. Yes, often we're so concerned about ourselves that we can't see those right in front of us, let alone try to understand and come to know them.

No wonder, on the news almost every night, there are stories of persons who become so lonely, so unhappy, so miserable, so lost, so desperate that they kill others and/or themselves. Usually everyone interviewed is shocked. “He sat in class next to me, but no, I really didn't know him,” we hear one person say. “He kept to himself, but he always seemed friendly,” we hear someone else say. “No, I have no idea why he'd do something like that,” someone else mouths. Many times behind such tragedies is the sad fact that no one really knew the person. If someone had, perhaps the person might not have resorted to such desperate actions.

Remember the email that was circulated some time ago about the quiet boy who got picked on by the other kids? Then one day another boy stood up for him. Years later, at graduation, the quiet boy (valedictorian, of course) was reading his speech and made eye contact with the boy who had helped him that one day so long before. And it turned out that the quiet boy had decided to kill himself the day the other boy helped him. Someone actually seeing him as a person had made all the difference—literally saved his life.

Indeed, we live in the modern age with so many ways to communicate, and yet we're really not very good at communicating what's most important—our essence. This creates major problems for us in our relationships. For how can there be real closeness, bonding, intimacy without honest sharing, sharing the essence of one another.

In our Saturday morning Spanish class, I've learned that in Spanish, there are two verbs for "to be." There's *estar*, and then there's *ser*. *Estar* communicates temporary or transitory things about people—such as if we'd say, "he is warm," meaning that at that moment, he might want to open a window. But *ser* is used to describe the essence of someone, so that if we use *ser* instead of *estar* when we say "he is warm," we're saying that his essence is warm—that he is, in other words, a warm-hearted person. Isn't that wonderful? Just the existence of a verb for describing the essence of someone! I like that! What a reminder to look, really look at ourselves, to think about what our essence is, and what a reminder to look at the essence of someone else.

One of the constant messages throughout the Bible is that God sees behind all of our masks, for God is truth, right? He sees everything we do, and he knows everything we think. He even knows how many hairs are on our heads! So, he indeed knows our essence.

And how obvious this was in Jesus' ministry. Jesus knew his disciples inside and out. He saw to their inner core. He knew about the deceit of Judas and the betrayal of Peter.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus says, "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." Our Lord knows each one of us, just as a shepherd knows his sheep.

Since most of us grew up in cities, we can easily miss the significance of what Jesus is saying. You see, back in Jesus' day, the shepherd lived with his sheep. At night, the shepherd led his sheep to an area where they could be somewhat contained. As each sheep entered the sheepfold, the sheep had to pass between

the shepherd's legs. This was an intimate time when the shepherd carefully examined each sheep. The shepherd lovingly removed cockleburrs from the sheep's wool and then gently rubbed salve into the wounds and sores. The shepherd talked to the sheep while he was doing this. He was patient with the weaknesses and often self-destructive tendencies of each sheep. He was compassionate toward the helplessness of his sheep, by their vulnerability to enemies, and by the way they sometimes put their trust in those who were not trustworthy. He had an intimate knowledge of each sheep. He knew each sheep well enough to understand how each particular sheep needed him and his care. So the shepherd was devoted to his sheep. He cared so deeply for their welfare that he wouldn't desert them, even if it meant laying down his own life to protect them.¹

Now I don't know about you, but for me, to hear Jesus say that he knows me this intimately is both frightening and comforting. It's frightening because of all the things I should have done but didn't; all the things I've done that I shouldn't have done but did; all the lesser thoughts that sometimes come to my mind--in other words, all those times when, like Adam and Eve, I wanted to hide from God behind a tree. Well, we might be able to hide from other humans--from fellow students, coworkers, neighbors, other church members, even family. But our Lord knows the thoughts of our hearts, the real motives for the surface good deeds we perform, all the ways we cut corners in life. All the struggles we have to be good are known completely, totally by God. This can be pretty embarrassing, humbling, disconcerting.

But the fact that we can't hide anything from God is also comforting. He knows our needs, our pains, our hurts, our sorrows, our disappointments. If we're bending low under the weight of any burden, God knows this. It's very comforting to know that the great creator of the universe knows us by name. He knows our burdens, our struggles, all of our situations.

A story is told about two ministers in the 19th century who went on holiday together, wandering around the hills of Ireland and Scotland. High on the moors, they met a shepherd boy and stopped to talk with him. The boy had never been to school. He didn't know how to read or write, and he knew nothing about the Christian faith. The two ministers read him the 23rd Psalm, and to help him find a personal faith, they taught him to repeat the words "The Lord is my Shepherd," by saying each word on a different finger of his left hand. The following year, the two ministers were back in the same hills. This time, they stopped at a cottage to

¹ Pattison, Dr. Lee G., professor of Biblical Archaeology for the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies and Brown, Raymond, The Gospel According to John

ask for a drink of water. The lady of the house noticed them looking at her photograph of a boy above the fireplace. "That's my son," she said. "He died last winter while tending the sheep in a snowstorm." The ministers told the grieving mother, "We met your boy last year. In fact, since he was a shepherd boy, we taught him to repeat the first line of the 23rd Psalm. We helped him remember each word by touching a different finger on his hand. We especially told him to pause when he got to the fourth word: 'The Lord is my shepherd.'" The mother smiled and said, "That explains something we were curious about. You see, when he was found, his right hand was clutching the fourth finger of his left hand." Yes, what a comfort for each of us to be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

What a comfort to know that the Good Shepherd, our Lord, lay down his life out of his love for us. Several centuries ago, Martin Luther, said, "If I were God, and the world treated me the way it treated God, I would have kicked the whole thing to pieces and started all over again." Fortunately for us, Luther wasn't God. Today's lesson should make Good Friday even more meaningful to us.

Sometimes we hear someone say, "Well, if you really knew me, you wouldn't think so highly of me." It's easy for us to think, "If Jesus really knew me, he wouldn't have given his life for me." But today's gospel lesson assures us that Jesus does know us, better than anyone. And it's because he knows us so well—it's because of our brokenness, our despair, our imperfections, our needs--that he lay down his life for us.

Knowing this about our Lord, we know his essence. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." Not only did Jesus know the people around him, Jesus also allowed the people around him to know him. Jesus was open and transparent to all who had eyes to see and ears to hear—to all who paid attention to him and sought to have a relationship with him. Similarly, still today, he wants to have a close relationship with us. He knows us, and he wants us to know him. He wants to be in intimate relationship with us.

If you visit any of the oldest congregational churches in our country, back in New England, you'll notice a little sign on each one. The sign won't indicate, however, when the church was "founded." That is to say, the sign won't say, "Founded in 1620," "Founded in 1636," "Founded in 1690." Instead, the sign will say, "Gathered in 1620," "Gathered in 1640," "Gathered in 1690." I like the distinction. Being founded and being gathered are very different. Being gathered reminds us that the church is people who have been brought together by the Lord, people who are known by and know their Good Shepherd, the Lord. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; May 3 2009