

On Being Our Name . . . Christ the Good Shepherd

By Pastor Les Swenson

Transition Pastor

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday
April 25, 2021
Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Hamden, Connecticut

GOSPEL READING: JOHN 10.11-18

One of the great challenges, opportunities, and gifts presented to expectant parents is that of choosing a name for their child. Some spend long hours poring over and pondering potential names. The first book that popped up on Amazon this week when I punched in “names” offered 100,000+ baby names. It was touted as the most complete and updated name book. For others, names come easily, perhaps when you know you want to pass on a family name, like “our son will be named Charles Dudley the 14th.”

It’s always fascinating to read about the origin of names for characters that cross the Biblical stage and about what those names might mean. Remember when God announced to Abraham and Sarah, those very aged folks more fit for the nursing home than the nursery, that Sarah would soon be bearing a child? In the wake of their snickering and laughter over the ridiculousness of that announcement, God told them that their child would be called Isaac (which of course means laughter).

Mary and Joseph had no choice in naming their firstborn. In two separate stories, the angel told each of them: “You will call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins,” which is to say, he will do what his name means. Joseph heard another, reassuring name for the child soon to arrive. He will be Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” And so he was.

Jesus did a little naming, or name changing along the way too, like with his sidekick Peter, trying to get his name to fit his character or role. Your Mama named you Simon, Jesus said, but from now on you’re gonna be Peter, which means Rock, which meant Jesus was going to depend on Peter to be the rock solid one when it came to building his church and proclaiming the gospel when Jesus was no longer around. And despite a few slips and bad fumbles and kerfuffles along the way, that’s what Peter was when it really counted.

We all know how important names are. Sometimes I wonder—do names define us or do we give definition to our names? Ponder that. People call us by our names (we hope). It’s how people know us—by our names. Names are who we are. The name is indeed the person, wrote Paul Tournier, a well-known Swiss physician of another era.

But how about naming things other than people—like congregations, like communities of faith like this one? There was little or no debate really in choosing a name for this new congregation a few months back. It seemed so fitting, so obvious . . . that Christ Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd should and would become Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. Bingo. That was that. A beautiful marriage of names and people. One name enhancing and identifying the other.

We are known by our name. We want to be known not as the brick building on the corner of Shepard and Sherman across the way from the Merryfield Vet Hospital or by the now closed YMCA, but by our name, by who we are and what we are about. Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church is a nearly unique name, by the way, in Lutheran circles, at least by my quick, perhaps too cursory scan via Google the other day—the only one in New England, a couple in California, one in Oregon, one in Michigan, another in Rochester, New York. Lots of Christ Churches, of course. And Good Shepherds too. But less than two handfuls of Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Churches.

So, how will we be Christ the Good Shepherd Church? How will our name define who we are and what we are about? How will people know Christ the Good Shepherd through the ministry of this community of faith?

We can take some clues from what Jesus says in the Gospel reading today, part of a longer discourse in which he talks about his role as shepherd.

Jesus begins by drawing a distinction between himself as the good shepherd and a hireling, a hired hand. The good shepherd is the one who is willing to take risks, even risk his life, for his flock, for the people he has been called to tend to and love, whereas the hired hand runs from risk, from danger, from challenge. Risk averse. Self-protection comes first.

I heard the other day about a word the Brits across the pond have to call someone similar to the one Jesus calls the hireling. Jobsworth is the word—a person who won't lift a finger to do more than the bare minimum his/her job requires. Ask jobsworths to exert themselves and they'll decline by saying: "It's more than my job is worth." A jobsworth, this description goes, "frustrates colleagues and casts a cloud of lethargy over the workplace."

When John the letter writer asks today: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" he rules out any "jobsworth-type" behavior in the community shaped by Christ the Good Shepherd. For the shepherd's love is a love that calls us to see beyond ourselves, to act boldly, with courage, in response to the genuine hurts and pains and needs not only of the people within the household of faith but in the neighborhoods and communities that surround us, in which we live and work and play. There is nothing passive here, no quiet waiting for people to come flocking to us, but an open willingness to look outward and beyond ourselves, to become vulnerable, to take risks in order to express the

compassion and grace of the good shepherd with our lives, our actions, our resources—a compassion and grace that knows, sees and affirms without hesitation the immeasurable worth of every human being.

There is no narrow, parochial vision to the way Christ the Good Shepherd sees things. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” he says today. “I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.” When he says this, he is opening our eyes widely to see and know the fullness, the broad width of the ministry to which we are called.

A week or so ago when the news media picked up on the latest Gallup poll about the sinking numbers of Americans who belong to a house of worship—it’s now for the first time less than half of the nation (47%)—I had two thoughts. What else is new? It’s reality. We’ve been watching this for some time. That’s one thought.

The other? The mission field to which we are called is getting bigger all the time! Our calling to be the church just got—what? More challenging, yes. But even more important. Wider and bigger.

In this world increasingly lonely and distanced; in this world plagued by suspicion, fear, a lack of honesty and truthfulness, by the pervasive, stubborn refusal to recognize the sin of racism, and yes, in a world in which people are turned off and away from churches so arrogant, so judgmental, so rigid and inhospitable; we live, at the same time, I am convinced, in a world thirsty for a taste of the goodness of God, a world yearning for the welcoming arms of a genuine, caring, authentic community of people.

Christ the good shepherd calls us to be just that—a community in which there is wide room and safety for genuine searching and honest speaking, for trust and understanding and common purpose to grow and blossom, for good news to be heard—news of a God whose forgiving mercies and abundant, life-changing love overcome all division and heal all brokenness, news of a good shepherd who opens his arms and accompanies each and every one of us through our long or short spells of dark valleys, of weariness, of pain and fear and uncertainty, who comforts and nurtures us in times of need, and who discomferts us when we need to be awakened to see anew; who invites us to dine at the feast where all are one, where all are welcome and fed, where joy abounds.

Gracious, empowering God,
you have named us, you have called us into life in your name.
In our life together, in our open welcoming arms,
in our living for others the love you have so freely poured upon us,
open the eyes of many to see and know and live
in the goodness and life-giving grace of Christ the Good Shepherd.
Amen.

LRS