

Not the Hired Hand

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
Preached on Good Shepherd Sunday, (3May), 2009.

Text: John 10:14

“I know my own and my own know me....” ~Jesus

Jesus said, “I know my own and my own know me.” During her Easter children’s sermon Mrs. Lacey asked the children, “When did you first hear the name *Jesus*?” I answered from the sidelines, somewhat humorously, “Before I was born.” I knew my mother had brought me to church while she was pregnant. No doubt I heard the name several times during those nine months. Certainly in the later stages of development *in utero* children are able to hear outside voices. Prenatal physicians say that the reason newborn infants respond to the voices of parents right after birth is because they have heard them through the wall of mother’s stomach, during gestation. When Cyndi was pregnant with Hannah she read a book all about teaching babies to love good music by listening to good music during pregnancy. Cyndi was convinced that Hannah loved pipe organ music because she kicked appreciatively at church during the pregnancy.

As I read Jesus’ statement about knowing his own and his own knowing him I remembered two stories from scripture. In the Garden of Eden, after eating the apple, Genesis says the man and the woman,

...heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”¹

Now how did the two first humans know who it was? How did they recognize God’s voice? “*I know my own and my own know me.*”

A second story, this one also in a garden, was the gospel lesson we read on Easter. Mary Magdalene stood weeping in the garden where Jesus had been buried. She was confused and torn apart with grief because of Friday’s cross. Now she and two of the male disciples discovered someone had taken the body of Jesus from the tomb. The men left to go back to Jerusalem but she stood there crying, not quite knowing what to do or where to go. Suddenly, she realized someone was with her and she—assuming he was the caretaker of the garden—turned and asked the stranger,

¹ Genesis 3:8-9.

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!”²

The moment of recognition was when he said her name. He said her name in his way and immediately, she knew it was Jesus. *“I know my own and my own know me,”* he taught.

This morning we almost sang as a communion hymn, *“You Satisfy the Hungry Heart.”* The first verse alludes to John’s good shepherd text: “As when the shepherd calls his sheep, they know and heed his voice; so when you call your family Lord, we follow and rejoice.” Because most of us have little experience shepherding, this allusion in the text can fly right by us. Sheep have an almost anthropomorphic trait: they seem to know and trust the voice of their shepherd. But Jesus went farther than that. A good shepherd protects his sheep, even laying down his life for his flock. A hired shepherd does not go that far. When danger approaches, the hired man flees. The good shepherd stays to fend off the predator and protect his flock. “I lay down my life for the sheep.” The relationship is mutual. The sheep know by the shepherd’s voice who will watch over them. *“I know my own and my own know me,”* Jesus said.

It is my experience that Jesus does not call a person’s name without a purpose for that disciple. In Biblical times he called Peter, James, John, Paul, and Mary. Later he called Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther. In our time Mother Theresa and us. One of the effects of the resurrection is that no longer are our encounters with him confined to the Holy Land. After the resurrection, he is able to call people all over the place, in different cultures, in unexpected situations. As in the call stories of Scripture, his voice compels. Some will hear and not recognize him. They will not care. We know his voice if we are supposed to know it, if we are ‘his.’ When we hear it we know we have no choice but to obey him, cheerfully, purposely, faithfully. And we know he is our shepherd, the one who will lay down his life for us.

Each time we come to this table, he calls us one by one. There is in the ritual the call to communion. Though done without individual names, I hope you hear in the minister’s invitation the call of the host of this feast. He calls you to covenant with him and his people. Each of us has a different purpose and mission, but he is the instigator. *“I know my own and my own know me,”* Jesus said.

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² John 20:15-16.