

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
October 4, 2009
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

“...he tells me I am his own...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

In 1973, when I graduated from college, I landed a wonderful first job. I went to work at the North Country School in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York teaching in a combined 5th and 6th grade classroom. The North Country School is a unique place. It is an elementary boarding school tucked in the mountains, and it operates a big working organic farm. The teachers, staff and students all work on farm for part of each day and eat the rewards! The students live with house parents in houses that dot the campus. Each month, one of the houses is responsible for doing one month of barn chores and that month is, for many houses, the highlight of their year of jobs on the farm.

When the rotation came around for our house to do barn chores, I dutifully woke up my sleeping students and hustled them out the door in their barn jackets and boots to trudge up the hill to the barn where the stalls were ready to be mucked out, the chickens needed feeding, the eggs had to be collected, vegetables had to be gathered from the root cellar, and the cows were waiting to be milked. Before I went to the school I had never milked a cow in my life BUT I soon learned and I became proficient enough to teach my students how to grasp the udder at the top and gently squeeze in a rhythmic motion down—not too hard, not too soft. Just the right touch—firm but gentle. Sitting on the little milking stool tucked right there next to, almost under, the cow, I showed my students how to grasp the top of the udder and slowly but surely squeeze their way down as the milk would squirt out into a clean silver bucket below. (There is also a little tiny tug involved, but very tiny.)

The students were rascals and once they got good at milking, they would aim an udder at someone sweeping the barn floor and squirt them with a blast of warm milk. Then there would be squeals of laughter!

We all loved the cows and we talked to them with tender greetings and affectionate words. And they were, of course, all named. There was Daisy, Darcy, Betty-Lou and Bonnie-Boo (don't ask me, they were named when I got there) and other cows whose names I forget. We would stroke their heads, call them by name and tell them what good girls they were for giving us such delicious milk and how much we loved them.

I thought about those early morning barn chores and Daisy, Darcy, Betty-Lou and Bonnie-Boo when I read an article in USA Today titled, "Naming Cows Isn't Udder Nonsense." The opening lines of the article read, "Cows that are given names produce more milk than those that are not, says a new study out of England. The study, conducted by Catherine Douglas and Peter Rowlinson at Newcastle University, discovered that more affectionate treatment of cattle—including giving cows names—can increase milk production by more than 68 gallons annually."

It turns out that when stressed, cows produce less milk. I learned, in this article, that a stressed cow releases a hormone called cortisol which inhibits milk production. Cows that are known by name are happy, calm and productive. Anonymous cows are more likely to be stressed and less productive. Fascinating! The study's findings certainly corroborated my experience with the cows at the school. We called them by name and they seemed peaceful and contented and they certainly produced a lot of milk.

My experience in the barn at the North Country School and my reading the article in USA Today made me think about the significance of being known by name. When we feel we are known, connected to someone, cared about as a unique individual we can—like the cows—feel happy and calm. It is good to be known. (It is better to be blessed than stressed.)

Calling someone by their name or calling someone a term of endearment reflects the closeness you feel toward them. Think about the names we use to refer to God—Holy One, Lord, Father, Mother, Creator. And the words we use to refer to Jesus—brother, teacher, rabbi, savior, friend. And now think about the words you have heard or would like to hear God or Jesus call you.

The significance of naming is illuminated in this poignant example from India. In India the "Dalits" or Untouchables are *required by Hindu law* to be given a name and it must be derogatory—they are called Ugly, or Dung or Stupid. Imagine the transformation a Dalit, or Untouchable would feel if they discovered that in Jesus, God came to earth as a "Dalit." AND that God has the power to rename them.

God calls them “Beloved,” “Holy,” “Precious.”

What we are named and what terms we are called matter deeply.

We want to be called by our own names—that matters to humans and, it turns out, it matters to cows as well.

In our reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews, we hear these words

*For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one God.
For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,
‘I will proclaim **your name** to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’*

“I will proclaim your name,” Jesus says. And, we are told, Jesus refers to us with the loving terms “brother and sister.” We hear that Jesus will proclaim (call out) our very names.

Today I want to invite you to think about Jesus calling your name.

Think about Jesus speaking to you with terms of endearment and closeness, “Beloved, Precious, Holy” and saying your name.

Place your thoughts there. Hear Jesus saying “Precious Toby...” “Beloved Gloria...” “Holy Linda...” “Beloved Sue...” “Cherished Fred...”

Jesus wants to be that close to you. Jesus knows your name and wants to whisper your name in your ear. I want you to let Jesus in that deeply and that closely.

Think about the hymn we sang at the beginning of our worship service today. “In the Garden,” a hymn so loved by so many in this church family, can be your guide for a close relationship with Jesus...

*And he walks with me
And he talks with me
And he tells me I am his own
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.*

He walks with me and he talks with me...and TELLS ME I AM HIS OWN.
How close and comforting, warm and uplifting, safe and reassuring is that....

And now reflect again on the Scripture reading for today. The Letter to the Hebrews says that “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” (1:1-2) Jesus “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (v. 3).

This reminds us of the first chapter of the Gospel of John...

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory of God’s son, full of grace and truth” (1:1, 14).

We are also reminded that in Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene is weeping when she finds the tomb where Jesus has been buried is empty. Jesus appears to her and tries to comfort her, but she thinks he is the gardener. They talk together but Mary does not recognize Jesus until he says her name.

*Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him “Rabbouni”
(which means Teacher). (20:16)*

What is important for us to recognize and to take deeply into our hearts is that God has spoken to us through Jesus. The word of God became flesh and lived among us. God has spoken to us through Jesus and Jesus speaks to us still. God is not distant, no, God has been and continues to be with us, through Jesus. God is not silent, no, God is still speaking to us and with us. God is not harsh, no, God is full of grace and truth.

The letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus will call us by name and praise us. “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

Today we are reminded that Jesus knows us and loves us, and us calls us by name....Shirley and Tony, Alice and Tom, Lynn and Ruth, Rick, Becky, Phil.... Jesus calls each one of us by name.

And on this World Communion Sunday, we pause to recognize that Jesus is also calling by name Christians we do not know, Christians we will never meet but who are Jesus’ brothers and sisters, and therefore they are our brothers and sisters as well....Juanita and Maseo, Daysheanna and Thulani, Li-Ling and Chen, Carlos and Jose, Alejandro and Orlando, Shenorig and Elida.

Jesus calls us ALL by name....we learn that in our Scriptures.

And when we allow that to sink deep inside us, the knowledge that Jesus loves us unconditionally and calls us by name and with sweet terms of endearment, that knowledge can make a difference in our lives each day.

Comfort and peace accumulate over time when we let Jesus walk with us and talk with us and tell us we are his own.

And so I leave you with a challenge: to grow in your relationship with Jesus by really working at it—reach out to him and spend quiet time with him day after day after day.

Jesus wants us to grow in our relationship with him. And like any good friendship, marriage or long-term relationship, we have to give our relationship with Jesus priority in our lives and work at it if it is going to be healthy, life-giving and fruitful.

Sociologist Tony Campolo has written that when the pillars of the church deepen their spiritual lives, they feel “a driving need to respond to the needs of others.” So growing closer to Jesus actually makes us more productive as Christians.

Growing closer to Jesus means that we can converse with him in prayer and hear him call us by name.

And we all want to be called by name. Whether our name is Francesca or Mary, Gina or Cora, Nancy or Trish, Bonnie Atkins or Bonnie-Boo.

We want to be known, to be spoken to with love, and to be called by name. We love it when we experience God calling us by name.

And so your challenge is to deepen your relationship with Jesus.

Spend time with him every single day.

Walk with him and talk with him.

And then grow still and listen.

And you will hear God say Wyatt, Emily, Kenny, Kathleen, Marcelle, Sally... you are my own.

Amen.

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