

"Name Calling."

Acts 2:42-47; Ps. 23; John 10:1-18

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 13, 2008

This passage from John's Gospel has many familiar images in it. It is a pastoral scene of sheep and shepherds. Central to the thrust of Jesus' teaching is that he is the Good Shepherd in contrast to other, would-be or false shepherds who lead sheep astray.

Jesus tells us that he has come that we might have life and have it abundantly. That is what a shepherd does. He makes sure that the sheep are well provided for, looked after, kept safe from predators.

The connecting link between sheep and shepherd is the familiarity of the voice and the call of the shepherd. Jesus says he knows his own and his own know him. There is a mark of identity. The Good Shepherd calls his own by name.

That is what first led to the title of this sermon. As I reflected on the names we are called, some of which aren't too flattering or kind, others of which are given as signs of endearment and friendship, it struck me that God knows my name and yours and I hope and pray that when God calls I will know and recognize the voice and have the good sense to follow.

Vocation means "Calling". God calls to us and shows us a path of service, a way to use our God-given gifts. The word for Church is "Ekklesia", "the ones called out", out of the world and into fellowship and communion with God and one another.

If I had decided to continue in that vein the sermon would have emphasized "holy name-calling", for lack of a better term, but that was earlier in the week before the events of this week rose more and more to the fore.

It often amazes me how the chosen texts for the week and the events of the week coincide or collide. The text from Acts Chapter 2 describes how the early church behaved. It devoted itself to the "apostles' teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread and the prayers." (2:42)

The early Christians were in awe of the signs and wonders being done among them. They were together and had all things in common.

Hmm, that sounds a bit like a utopian community to me, this enclave of righteousness in the midst of society. They were looking forward to Christ's return and confident that the Lord would not be slow about his promises.

They might have been called the "Yearning for Zion Group". They might have been found as easily in Eldorado, Texas, as in Jerusalem way back then.

Our news has been filled with reports of the raid on the Texas compound following allegations of abuse and misconduct. Over 400 children have been removed from the ranch called the "Yearning for Zion Ranch". It remains to be seen how this story will end, but it is easy to see how it started.

The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints split from the mainline LDS or Mormon church over 100 years ago. One of the main points of contention was over the issue of

plural marriage. The practice of polygamy was part of the Mormon church's teaching and seen as necessary to achieve the highest level of salvation. But it was a stumbling block in the road to statehood for Utah.

When the LDS church dropped its endorsement of polygamy in favor of following the Federal laws against it, there were those in the church who saw this as a sell-out and a departure from church teaching.

It reminds one of the scene from the Book of Acts where St. Peter is dragged in front of the Jewish Council. They tried to insist that he and the other early church leaders not preach that Jesus was the Messiah. But Peter refused, saying: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (5:29).

Those of the Fundamentalist LDS church believed that the mainline LDS church had sold out and caved in under pressure from the federal government and given up following revealed Mormon church truths. They felt this was a departure from the teachings of founder Joseph Smith and so they broke away.

The Texas compound is but one of many communities of believers who trace their roots to Joseph Smith and who claim to follow a purser path of obedience and observance. They know the voice they are listening to and will listen to no other. (Do you hear echoes of John chapter 10?). They have been taught that the government is their enemy and not to be trusted. TV, radio and newspapers are all suspect. Polygamy remains an essential aspect of their common life.

And so, once again, people of faith are in conflict with civil authority.

I wonder how we would react if things that we considered central to our faith were banned by the government. How far would we go in listening to the voice of our Shepherd even when it brought us into direct confrontation with civil authority?

This sermon is not meant in any way to be an endorsement of the practices of other faiths. I am not even remotely suggesting that abuse of children, women or anyone should be ignored or excused just because it is stamped with a religious label.

Rather, what continues to capture my attention is this whole question: How do we know that what we know is true, how do we recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and how do we follow in faith and obedience and trust?

As far as gaining a sense of conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and his teachings are trustworthy and true, first and foremost we need to be immersed in the Scripture, in study and in community with other Christians. We could do far worse than follow the example of the early Church as they devoted themselves daily to study, fellowship, worship and prayer (Acts 2:42).

Sheep will not learn to recognize the Shepherd's voice if they aren't around the Shepherd on a daily basis. There is a relationship that is forged through daily connection with the one who has promised us abundant life.

Sorting through all the conflicting and competing teachings of those who claim to speak truth is never easy, but it does become easier when we keep Jesus Christ at the center and use his teachings and his ministry, his sacrificial death and his gracious

promise of new life as the touchstone by which all other truths are measured.

Jesus is the one who claims to be the Good Shepherd and who tells us here in John's gospel in verse 16 that he has other sheep who are not of our fold, but who also know and recognize his voice and who are also following him and whom he will bring, along with us into that one flock of all who are gathered to him.

Our primary task, as always, is to limit our name-calling and instead listen for God calling our name. It is to trust in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and to immerse ourselves in his message of love and forgiveness. It is to rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide us and direct us. It is to serve others in his name.

It is to go out of our way to model and demonstrate a transformed lifestyle that is not driven by fear or by blind obedience to authority, but rather is buoyed up by joy and the knowledge that we are saved through faith in Christ. We are not saved through how many wives (Or husbands) we have or don't have or how many children we have produced.

We are saved by God's grace through faith. This is God's gift to us, a sign of God's unfailing love for us, a message of hope and deliverance for all people everywhere.

May we trust in God's promises each and every day and may we live in the light of God's love, listening always for the voice of the Good Shepherd, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.