



Sermons

from Northwood United Church

**“A Community of Belonging:
Knowing and Being Known”**

John 10:11-18

Will Sparks

April 29, 2012

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to begin with a little experiment, a voice recognition experiment. Can anyone recognize this voice?

- Martin Luther King Jr.
- Sir Winston Churchill
- Nelson Mandella

We recognize these voices because we have heard them over and over, and also because we have heard them in times in memorable moments in life. These are legendary voices. I remember when I was in university I used to go to the audio library and get out records of great speeches, the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, Tommy Douglas and others, and I would listen to these voices of people I was studying. Hearing their voices made all the difference in getting a sense of the time and the place and the person,

I am sure you have people in your life whose voice you can recognize on the phone. I call the church and say, “Hi Shelli, it’s me.” Well “me” could be anybody, but me with this particular voice is recognizable. I love the hesitation in my mom’s voice when I call and say “Hi Mom.” Most of the time she can distinguish my voice from those of my brothers, but not always.

Shelli has talked about working hard to remember people by their voices because it feels so good to call the church and have her recognize your voice even without your name. There is something about voice recognition that means you have moved one step deeper in the relationship, that you are known and loved- that you matter. Name recognition is one thing. Voice recognition is a deeper thing, and it is about being known.

Think about the word, recognition. To re-cognize. Cognition is all about knowing- using our cognitive functions to know something or someone. To re-cognize is to know again, which is more than remembering but reconnecting with a previous knowing.

Jesus said to his disciples “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Not everyone will do that. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... And I will bring others along and they will recognize my voice.” Later on he says, “My sheep recognize my voice, I know them, and they follow me...” Being known, well enough for voice recognition is a significant level knowing. This was the nature and quality of the relationship Jesus had with his disciples. When I read the gospels I am continually taken aback by the depth and quality of relationship there between Jesus and his followers, a trust that seemed to flow, an implicit trust. It is like very quickly upon meeting him, they know him and he knew them- the relationship of shepherd and sheep.

When I was in Salmon Arm there was a member of the congregation there who was just deeply and tenderly committed to the church. She is one of those people who you can count on for support for the mission and ministry no matter where it will take you. She was a bell-weather of the community, somebody whose opinions were indicative of more than just herself. Her name was Helen and Helen was a dear grateful soul who would, every season, leave a card in my

mailbox thanking me for the ministry I offer, and inevitably she would say something like, "Thank you for being our shepherd."

Now I've got to tell you that Shepherd is not an image for ministry that I wear easily. A shepherd is kind of in charge, and I have rarely felt that way as a minister. And certainly in relation to Jesus I often feel like a sheep, needing guidance and protection. So I have decided that when it comes to shepherd and sheep imagery, my role is neither. I'm the sheep dog, running around trying to keep the sheep together, listening for signals that will tell me what to do next. We should never take metaphors too far because at a certain point the sheep dog starts nip at the heels of the sheep.

However, there is something deep in recognizing the authentic voice of Jesus. In this post Easter time when we share in the story of the time after the crucifixion and resurrection the focus shifts from Jesus in his life, to Jesus in the life of the community of faith. From Jesus in the world back then to the life of the Body of Christ in the world today. What is the quality of voice recognition in the community today? Who do you know here well enough to be able to recognize their voice?

You see I believe that one of our basic human needs is to know and be known in community. I remember when I went off to seminary in Saskatoon as a young adult, I left behind a community at St. Aidan's United Church in Victoria in which I was known and in which I knew a significant number of people really well. We had been through significant life together. And when I got to Saskatoon after a while I felt kind of homesick for St. Aidan's and I realized that it wasn't just that I didn't know anybody in Saskatoon, but it was also that nobody knew me. I couldn't go into a church and feel the familiarity of being known and accepted and understood. Homesick, I discovered, is in part missing people, but it is also in large measure feeling the vulnerability of not being known by anybody. When I talk to people who have lost a spouse, they talk about missing the person and invariably there is mixed in there the vulnerability of no longer having someone there who knows you really really well. We need to be known. .

To belong is to be known. And there are times in our lives when we lose track of ourselves and we need someone who knows us to come along side and remind us who we are. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we walk through a rough patch in a marriage, we walk through conflict at work and these are times when we need perspective on ourselves not just on the situation. These are times when we need the voice from outside of ourselves that we know and recognize and trust to be able to say, "Will, I know you. I know what you are made of. You will make it through this." And at other times, when we are not being ourselves, we need someone who knows us, with whom there is deep trust, to come alongside and say, "This is not like you. Why are you being like this...."

My image of the Christian community is a community in which we know and are known. The church for me is the Body of Christ, where the voice of Jesus is still heard and recognized, and often through the voices around us because they know us and we know them- the place of trust where we not only come on Sunday morning for Spiritual nurture, but a community where we invest ourselves to the degree that people know us. That makes trust such an important quality within the fabric of the community. That takes risk and vulnerability. It is that knowing and being known, that quality of spirit in relationship that makes us the Body of Christ. That is the active agent of the spirit of Jesus Christ among us. Knowing and being known.

But of course, that also means that active agent has grace at the very center of it, because frankly, if you only knew, I'd be standing in the need of grace- every one of us would be standing in the need of grace. To open ourselves, to be known requires that the grace of God be among us. But that is why we are here- to meet that very basic human need within the context of the grace of God as we have experienced in in Jesus Christ. If you look around you discover that there are very few places, very few communities for whom that is the center- to be known and to

know and to experience the grace of God. But that is our mission- to know and be known. That is what it means to be embraced with the love of Christ.

May we experience that here. Amen.