

“Called Out,”
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/26/26

A few weeks ago, on a glorious Easter Sunday, we shared communion with roughly 400 of our closest friends. In the past when Easter has fallen on the first Sunday of the month, when we usually serve communion – in the past we’ve decided that serving the Lord’s Supper to a full church was too complicated and possibly too time-consuming in the middle of a service that’s already bursting at the seams. But this year, thanks to the ingenuity of our own clerk of session Buddy Storm, we figured out a way to incorporate communion into the Easter service. Buddy realized that bringing half of the congregation to the front of the Sanctuary to be served, while at the same time rotating those in the back half of the Sanctuary through the narthex – that would allow us to expeditiously serve the sacrament to a packed house.

By the grace of God and the good preparation of our elders, on Easter Sunday we were able to serve everyone without a hitch *and* still be done with the service in time to finish the egg hunt before the spring rain swept in. But more than that, we provided gracious hospitality to everyone who gathered here to celebrate Christ’s resurrection with us. Regardless of whether they were members, friends or strangers – together we said, “Come to the table with us. Jesus says that here, there’s more than enough room for everyone.” As we shared the feast that Christ prepares for us, we were knit together as his body in this place, and simultaneously joined with the church universal, the faithful of every time and place who forever sing to the glory of God’s holy name.

Serving communion to so many people, both familiar faces and unknown guests – saying “the bread of heaven for you,” “the bread of heaven for you,” saying “the bread of heaven for you” a hundred times in a row reminded me of an encounter I had one Christmas Eve several years ago. You see, at the church I served in Austin, celebrating communion on high holy days was not a “once every few years when Easter happens to fall on the first Sunday of the month” kind of occurrence. Rather, celebrating communion with the whole company of the faithful was built into every Easter service, as well as every Christmas Eve service, even the late afternoon one with the kids’ pageant. I especially loved this tradition at Christmas, when we give thanks for Jesus coming to us as word made flesh. Word made flesh – God’s intangible grace taking on the physicality of human form. And what could be more tangible than handing someone a piece of bread? “Take, eat – this is the bread of heaven for you. Christ came into this world for you.”

It was one such Christmas Eve, at the later, candlelit service, that I ripped a piece of King’s Hawaiian bread off the common loaf and handed it to a young woman I didn’t know very well, the daughter of a colleague who lived and worked in another region of the presbytery. As this young woman took her turn at the front of the line, I said: “The bread of heaven for you, Joanna.” But instead of following the flow of people onto the elder holding the cup, she hesitated. I watched her cock her chin – just slightly, but still noticeable. And then her eyes welled with tears. I was taken aback – at first I wondered if she was maybe going through something difficult I didn’t know about. And then I worried that I had gotten her name wrong. “Shoot,” I thought. The interaction scratched at my brain through the rest of the service.

And then after worship, as people joyfully greeted each other in the church’s narrow narthex, my colleague’s daughter came to find me. “How did you know my name?” she asked. A wave of relief passed over me – I had gotten it right! But also, how did I know her name? I didn’t have a good answer. I just did – from her mom’s Facebook posts, I guess. But how was not really what was important. What was important was that in that moment, I had remembered. I had remembered and I had called her by name, and that had meant something to her. She was no longer an anonymous person participating in a Christmas Eve service far from home: no, far from being anonymous, she was known; she was valued; she was loved.

Every time I saw her after that, usually just once a year on Christmas Eve – but every time I saw her she would come up and give me a warm hug. Even years later, she remembered that I had known her name. From Joanna I learned that a very simple act of care can be a very deep act of care. To be known by name, to be called by name – that is a powerful thing.

In today’s lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus says that he is the good shepherd; Jesus says that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus argues that one of the ways you know he is the good shepherd and not a thief or a bandit coming to take advantage of the sheep – one of the ways you know he is the good shepherd is that the sheep hear his voice. The sheep hear his voice, the sheep *know* his voice, and the shepherd calls all his sheep by name. Jesus calls all his sheep by name. Jesus calls his sheep by name, and they follow him.

It's one thing to remember one person's name; it's another to know all your sheep by name. And I don't know about you, but if I'm being honest all sheep kind of look the same to me. So I'm very impressed by the idea that shepherds would know the names of all of their sheep, which apparently good shepherds actually do. To see individuals in a herd, to be able to differentiate them, to be able to pick out each one and call each one by name: that takes dedicated attention. That takes time; that takes a strong desire to know. That takes a lot of care, to learn the name of every individual sheep in a flock of animals that all look pretty much the same, at least to the casual observer.

But Jesus is willing to put in the effort. That is the kind of care our Savior takes with each of us; that is the kind of attention we receive as members of God's flock. The gospel assures us that Jesus calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. "Sandy!" Jesus calls. "Sandy! Rebecca, Zach, Barbara, Delores, Vince, Steve, Emily - come on out! I have places for you to go, work for you to do in my name, work that uses your unique gifts. Right this way, right through this gate. Follow me!" The Good Shepherd knows each of his sheep by name. And as we baptized JR, Charlotte and Frankie this morning, we affirmed that the Good Shepherd knows each of them by name as well. In baptism God claimed them and sealed them to show that they belong to God. Jesus knows their names, Jesus calls them by name, calls them out to follow him. And it is no different for each of us - Jesus knows each of us by name and Jesus calls each of us out to follow him.

I find it interesting that Jesus says he leads his sheep out. So often when Christians read this passage from the Gospel of John we focus on the calling *in* part - we focus on Jesus saying that whoever enters by him, whoever enters by the gate that is Jesus will be saved. If you want to enter the safety of God's sheepfold - if you want to enter the safety of God's sheepfold you have to come in through Jesus, we say, often with a metaphorical wag of our finger at those of other religions, other traditions.

But being in the sheepfold is not the point. The sheepfold, in Jesus' day an enclosure for the sheep close to or even up against the family home, ringed with a stone wall and fitted with a gate - the sheepfold is a place to stay temporarily. It's a place to stay overnight to be protected from dishonest thieves and hungry wolves. But the sheepfold is not where the green pastures are. The sheepfold is not where the quiet waters are. To get to the green pastures and quiet waters you have to trust the shepherd. To get to green pastures and quiet waters you have to follow the shepherd out through the gate. To get to the green pastures and quiet waters you have to hear the shepherd calling your name and follow him out of the sheepfold, trusting that he knows where to find abundant life.

It's tempting to stay in. In a world of chaos and turmoil, it's natural to want to stay at home, stay safe in the sheepfold where it feels like none of the bad stuff can get to us. And sometimes we need the break. Sometimes we need to retreat to safety, to a place where we can rest and regroup. But our God is always calling us out - calling us out beyond our comfort zones, calling us out to places that are not always safe, to places that are not always free from danger, but calling us out always to abundant life. Calling us to take the risk of leaving the sheepfold to find abundant life in service to Christ.

Later this year, our church will begin a season of anniversaries. This fall will be the 175th anniversary of the first sermon given to what would become the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, and next spring will be the 175th anniversary of our congregation's official charter. 175 years on this beloved hill. As we plan to celebrate the past we also turn our eyes to the future - where might our Good Shepherd be calling us to go? What might we be invited to risk and dare as we follow Christ in our time, as we follow Christ in our broken and fearful world? How can we grow in grace-filled hospitality, in Spirit-inspired care for our neighbors, in Christ-like courage and compassion? Together we listen for our shepherd's voice, calling us by name, calling us to follow him, out to where we might find abundant life.