

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

## ON BEING WILLING TO BE KNOWN

"I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."


John 10:14

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No portion of scripture is loved more dearly the world around than the 23rd Psalm. The figure of God as shepherd, how vividly it conveys his care of us. And the implicit picture of man as sheep, how aptly it describes our dependence on the goodness and mercy of another. This shepherd image strangely enough still has force and meaning for us even though we live in an urbanized and technological society. We walk more on pavement than on grass and seldom see a sheep much less a shepherd.

The New Testament counterpart to the 23rd Psalm is the tenth chapter of St. John's Gospel. The heart-beat of this chapter sounds in the 11th verse where Jesus says "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." Today however I should like us to camp around some words that follow three verses on where our Lord goes on to say, "I know my sheep and am known of mine." Arnold Come, President of San Anselmo Seminary, suggests that those brief words summarize the entire ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

"I know my sheep and am known of mine." Indeed, Jesus knew his sheep. He knew them personally. He knew each for what he was and for what he might become. Hence, of Nathaniel we read "Jesus saw Nathaniel coming unto him and saith of him Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile. Nathaniel saith unto him. Whence knowest Thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee!" (John 1:47) Knowing the potential of the big fisherman he could look him straight in the face and say "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas." (John 1:42)

Even though Nicodemus came to him by night he knew the man behind the question. He discerned the treachery that lay like a dark pool at the base of Judas' soul.

He knew the needs of a crowd. He could see through all manner of masks and poses to the self that looked out from within. John was struck by this capacity of his Lord for he notes in his gospel after telling of the first miracle that "Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man." (John 2:24,25) Amazing!

But the more I wrestle with these words the more I am driven to conclude that the greater wonder lies in the second affirmation: "I know my sheep and am known of mine." Or, as another rendering has it, "and my sheep know me."

Jesus' ministry was marked by mutuality. His conversations and relationships were not one-way affairs. He wasn't trying to project an image and thus did not have to hide or falsify his reactions to life. When he was hungry he did not deny it. When he was sad they saw the tears in his eyes. When he was angry they felt the reverberations of his wrath. When he was disappointed his letdown was not veiled. When he was pleased his joy was not suppressed. G.K. Chesterton was taken by this openness of Jesus. In his book Orthodoxy he wrote: "Jesus' pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. Jesus never concealed his tears. He showed them plainly on his open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of his native city. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained his anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell." <sup>1</sup> Behold the man Jesus Christ, open, transparent, unaffected; not posturing, but every inch alive!

"I know my sheep and my sheep know me." How we suffer by comparison here. We are so reluctant to be known. How many army officers could say "I know my men and my men know me?" How many parents could say "I know my children and am known of them?" How many professors could say "I know my students and am known of them?" How many pastors could say "I know my people and my people know me?" It is ironical that for all our talk about communication and dialogue we are still unable to be open and knowable to the other. It would seem that we prefer to be unknown or even mis-known rather than fully known. It is so easy for us to hide from one another, behind a shield of cynicism, a sense of humor, a string of chatter, a screen of busyness, behind the postures and paraphernalia of our particular professions.

Carlyle Marney tells of the time he tried to help a doctor friend who had a problem at home to which he would not face up. A round of golf was arranged in the hope that communication might be easier in an informal setting. At one point along the fairway of a hole where their drives fell close Marney drew a deep breath and said "John what are you when you're not a doctor?" Quickly and with obvious irritation John replied "By God I'm always and MD!" How easily we become masters of evasion, clinging to our professionalism or to any other device that will allow us safely and comfortably to hide out.

From what one reads this is the way it works out in the environment of our employment. Vance Packard in his Pyramid Climbers notes that corporations today, particularly non-family owned corporations, expect their executives to be reaction proof. They are to develop a stoic-like sameness towards all people and events. They are expected to feature an image of imperturbable neutrality. Perhaps this is why the cocktail hour has become the dominant ritual of the business world. After a man falsifies or suppresses his reactions all day long he feels the need for release, even the chemically induced release of alcohol.

George Eliot speaks to this when she writes in Middlemarch, "It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry, shivering self--never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardor of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted. Doubtless some ancient Greek has observed that behind the big mask and the speaking-trumpet, there must always be our poor little eyes peeping as usual and our timorous lips more or less under anxious control." 2

This unwillingness to be known also invades the environment of the home. Why do we find it so hard to share our inmost needs and hurts with those we love the most. Frequently what passes for dialogue in our homes is nothing more than two monologues hurled at one another. I suspect that we men are the chief culprits here. When a man leaves home in the morning and says "Good-bye, I'm going to the rat race," what he really means is "Good-bye to the rat race, I'm going to my work where I will not need to be so fully known."

But saddest of all, this unwillingness to be known has invaded the environment of faith, the church. When one looks at the list of events put out by a church for a given week he cannot help but wonder just where on that schedule an individual who had a heavy burden would stand a chance to be received and known and understood. Where in all of our activity can priesting take place? Where is there a Women's Society meeting anywhere to which an injured woman might repair with the thought that here she will be heard? Where is the Church School class that is more concerned with the pertinent question of a troubled student than getting through with the lesson of the day? We have developed subtle and elaborate ways of keeping one another at arm's length. The term "fellowship" (koinonia) once

a strong and noble term, has been reduced to a meaningless platitude in most congregations.

Perhaps the epitome of what I am getting at can be seen in the emphasis on non-direct counselling that was the rage a few years back. The minister was to stay ensconced in his seat behind the desk, properly supported by a few framed diplomas gleaming from the wall. As the counselee began to pour out a tale, sometimes of deep anguish, he was to remain antiseptically uninvolved and simply chip in now and then with an "I see," or an "Uh huh." It has always seemed to me that this approach is not only psychologically unsound but theologically unworthy of our faith. I can conceive of no situation in which one might be related to another Christian as the holy to the unholy, as the wise to the unwise. It is cause for thanksgiving that responsive counselling is now the order of the day.

A minister, at the right time, must be willing to be known. He must be willing to acknowledge that he is bone of the counselee's bone and flesh of his flesh. This is what happened that morning when the minister arrived at his study at 8:00 o'clock and found a huge, hulking, steel salesman sobbing waiting for a chance to speak. He had gone down to the Susquehanna River for a little fishing the night before but rain had fallen and he had gone to a tavern for shelter and refreshment. There he had met a woman and for the first time ever had compromised his marriage vows. He was afraid to go home. Healing began in that counselling situation when the minister dared to suggest that anything that any other man has ever done he himself could do under similar circumstances. When it came time to pray the minister prayed not for the man but with him. The church is not a parade ground where we strut our virtues before the world. The church is more like a hospital in which all are sick with a sickness unto death, but for the Grace of God. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

Perhaps somewhat defensively, you say, "Well some are like that and some aren't. Some of us are open and some are closed. Some are extroverted and some introverted, so what!" But not so quickly. There is something more involved here than the mere cast of one's personality. Our very integrity is at stake, something as old fashioned and fundamental as our sincerity. Sincerity is the duty to be for one's self and for others whatever one really is. We used to sing a song years ago that didn't have a lot of gospel in it I guess, but it did make sense: "I would be true for there are those who trust me."

Moreover, our neighbor's good may rest on our ability to be open. There are attitudes that you and I take toward other people that are either enabling or disabling. If we stay bottled up, locked in within ourselves, if we refuse to be known, this has an inhibiting effect on the other person who might have deep need to open up. There is something radically wrong if we are chronically not "at home" to other people, if we are never "in" when they wish to call. Alber Camus was honest enough to write: "I progressed on the surface of life, in the realm of words as it were, never in reality. All those books barely read, those friends barely loved, those cities barely visited, those women barely possessed; I went through the gestures out of boredom or absent-mindedness. Then came human beings; they wanted to cling, but there was nothing to cling to, and that was unfortunate--for them. As for me, I forgot. I never remembered anything but myself." <sup>3</sup> What a pity that when a neighbor asks the bread of our concern and conversation we should give him instead the stone of our silence and indifference.

But most serious of all, this unwillingness to be known comes down at bottom to a denial of our very freedom in Jesus Christ. Knowledge is power. We hear this all the time. And insofar as I give you knowledge of myself I am to that degree giving you power over me. This is the fundamental reason why we are unwilling to be known.



A few summers ago we chanced upon a small diner in upper Michigan. Some boys were there looking for a sandwich and trying to make a little time with a very attractive waitress behind the counter. It shrunk the generation gap a little for me to discover that the techniques have not changed much over the years. The opening gambit was simply, "What did you say your name was?" Very firmly the girl replied, "I didn't say." Had she said, "My name is Margaret," the boy would have said, "You know I have an Aunt Margaret living in Toronto." He would have gained a bit of power over her. The boy persisted "Where did you say you were from?" Again, "I didn't say." Had she said I'm from Toledo," you can bet that the boy would have lived there once and used that "fact" to advance his cause.

Fearing to give another power over us we prefer to stay unknown. It's none of your business where I'm ticklish. I'm not about to tell you what particular subjects can make my temperature soar. That's for you to find out!

There is a vulnerability to being known and we prefer not to take the risk. But doesn't vulnerability belong to the essence of love? Does not love lead to "unilateral disarmament" in personal relationships? Love is vulnerable. It can be taken - sometimes as far as a cross.

But is this not really the heart of the Good News, that we have nothing to fear in being known for God who matters most and knows us best has chosen to receive and accept us. He reads us down to the basement of our lowest thought and does not cast us off. Though we are poor he has made us rich. Though we are sinners he has justified us by His Grace. Though we are disobedient He has deigned to call us sons!

"I know my sheep and my sheep know me." We would make a good beginning towards a better world if where we work we could honestly say "I know my fellow employees and they know me;" if in our homes we could honest-

ly say, "I know my loved ones and am known of them;" if in our churches we could say in truth "I know my brethren in the faith and am known of them." To will to be honest before God and open to each other is simply to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God forgive us our reluctant to be  
before others what we really are.  
Forgive us our role playing, our image bearing,  
our deceit.  
Free us from the misguided fear of honesty and  
uphold us by Thy Grace that we may the  
better serve thee and those whom thou  
has given us.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Chesterton, G.K., Orthodoxy, p. 298,  
Dodd Mead & Co., 1946
2. Eliot, George, Middlemarch, p. 9 Part II,  
Peter Fenelon Collier
3. Camus, Albert, The Fall, p. 50,  
Vintage Books, 1956



