

### *Belonging and Believing*

The tension is thick in this interaction between Jesus and the Jews who surround him in the temple. They're fed up. They tell Jesus to stop being so mysterious. They want him to state clearly whether or not he is the Messiah. His reply, "I have told you, and you do not believe." And he challenges them that if they would only open their eyes and see what he's been up to, they would see that he belongs to the Father.

If they would only open their ears to hear his voice, they would understand that they too could belong to his sheep. Jesus isn't trying to keep them in suspense. His words and actions speak loud and clear about his relationship to his Father. And Jesus invites all who hear him to join his flock.

Very simply...all it takes to belong and believe is to listen to his voice and to allow yourself to be known by him.

When I was a kid, I lived in a neighborhood on a circle drive with large lots, and lots of kids. In the summer we would play outside for hours together. And each family had their own way of calling us in for dinner. Our family had a cowbell that my mom would ring outside the kitchen door. Our next-door neighbors had a megaphone that had one of those siren like buttons on it. And when it was time for dinner, mom would ring the big, loud bell. And then she'd wait. And if she didn't hear the response - "COMING!" - she'd ring it again. And if she didn't get the response, she'd pick up the phone and call next door figuring we were inside.

The point is this: She'd keep calling until she got a response - how else did she know we'd heard her? And more importantly - though I didn't know it at the time - it wasn't so much that I knew who was calling me - my mom - but that my mom knew who she was calling: **her** children.

In Jesus the Good Shepherd, we don't just have someone who stands in a doorway calling us, expecting us to come running. We have one who knows us, who claims us, keeps us safe, and leads us home.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is the one several "I AM" declarations. Jesus says: I am the vine, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection.... But this one - *I am the Good Shepherd* - is all about belonging in a relational way that is intricately connected with the blessing of believing. Here we are invited not just to believe, but to belong, to discover both a promise and our purpose.

In Jesus as the shepherd we recognize and realize that we are deeply known and yet, at the same time, we are aware of so many others who also desperately need to be known, that they may also not just believe, but belong as well.

I noticed something in this passage this time around as I spent time with it...about Jesus and the flock. We don't follow the Shepherd because we know HIM - we follow the Shepherd because he knows US. It's right there in verse 27: Jesus says, *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*

It's the kind of knowing like when you can pick out your kid, covered in gear, at a hockey or football game.

It's the kind of knowing like when you get a text from your daughter and you know something is not quite right. And you call her right away.

It's the kind of knowing like when the one you love says your name. And they say it in a way that no one else does.

It's the kind of knowing like when you know you will never be let go.

It's the kind of knowing that wants to invite others into the flock, into a belonging that will become believing.

This is Jesus as the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep, who calls us by name.

This is Jesus as the Good Shepherd who tends his sheep but is always going out to find the lost and abandoned: the one who finds herself alone at the well, the one who finds himself passed over and passed by day after day, those who are cast aside, tossed out.

In other words, all of us! He knows us, and we belong to him. And so we follow, trusting our Good Shepherd. How else would we know how to stay on the right path?

Last Sunday evening at my church in Groton, we had Confirmation Class and the topic was the three vows the kids being confirmed will make which have to do with their relationship to the church - belonging. And I read them a poem I discovered years ago.

**Being a Christian without going to church is like being:**

A soldier who will not join the army.  
 A salesperson with no customers.  
 A sailor without a ship.  
 A businessperson on a deserted island.  
 An author with no readers.  
 A tuba player without the rest of the band.  
 A parent without a family.  
 A football player without a team.  
 A scientist who does not share her findings.  
 A bee without a hive.

To believe in Jesus the Good Shepherd IS to belong to the flock.

The truth is, I don't know what I'd believe in if I didn't belong to the flock. On my own I don't think I can believe much. I need the stories that people tell me about how God is providing for them in unpredictable ways. That the cancer is now gone. That the long dark days of depression are over. That after a long months of unemployment - a job!

This is not belonging for belonging's sake - if that were the case we'd be some sort of do-gooder's club. This is much more than that! It's belonging for the sake of believing in Jesus our Lord and our Savior.

A pastor friend of mine told me about a couple in his church - long time members, who came to see him. They were really engaged and participated all over the place, but they were upset because they'd discovered that the UCC was taking positions on issues that they disagreed with. They told him they did not want to be a part of such a church, and so they'd be pulling their pledge, and would be looking for another church.

After listening well to them, my friend said something like this: *I can understand how upset you are, but here's the thing....Ultimately, you don't belong to the UCC or even this church. First and foremost, you belong to Christ, and Christ has called you to belong to the people here in this community. We belong to Him and we belong to each other. So before you leave, you need to consider, 'As those who belong to Christ, what does He want for us and from us in this community?'*

They didn't leave the church...

First we belong to Christ. Which is why we baptize infants! These little ones belong first to Christ, and as you fulfill the vows you have made, in time they will know that they belong to the community, through which they will come to believe in the One to whom they belong.

We belong to Christ, and we belong to each other. And we have not just a Good Shepherd, but THE Good Shepherd - OUR Good Shepherd. Whose voice we know, and who knows us! And so we follow...

Amen.