

April 22, 2018 – The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday, Baptisms of Lillian & Lucas Tysick, Reception of New Members
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Name Tags

Today's sermon is a little different, a little shorter than usual, and a little more active than usual: today's sermon includes an activity for you to do. It's not a complicated activity, and hopefully we will all comply, like good little sheep this Good Shepherd Sunday. The activity will explain one of the things inserted in the bulletin: the name tags. Here's the activity: take out the nametag, take a marker (there are markers at the ends of the pews today, now you know why those are there), write your name on the tag, and put it on. If the nametag slipped out of your bulletin or your marker doesn't work, just raise your hand, the acolytes are ready to help.

We're doing this activity today for the benefit of something else inserted in the bulletin, or rather for the someones who are described on the inserted sheet, we're doing this for our new members—how wonderful to have so many people joining our church today! To help identify our new members we have this sheet, this cheat sheet. But, someone pointed out to me, while this helps us know who they are, how will they know who everybody else is? Thus our name tag activity—an activity which can continue even after the sermon: keep wearing your name tag as you share the peace, and as you walk up to communion. And after church, don't put your coat on right away, have a piece of cake back in the narthex, at the new member reception. While you are doing all of this, wear your name tag, so our newest members can see your name. And so members who aren't so new can see it, too. I don't know if I still count as a new member, I've been here 4 years, I guess that makes me a Senior... this is helpful for me. You know how that is, right? You'll see someone and think, I know I know them, but what is their name?

Nametags can be helpful, especially fitting today, I thought, when someone suggested doing this today, because it's not just New Member Sunday, it's also Good Shepherd Sunday—and I seemed to recall that Jesus says something about names in that long talk he has about being the Good Shepherd, and what a Good Shepherd does for the sheep. We always hear that speech, known as the “Good Shepherd Discourse” on this Sunday, the 4th Sunday of Easter. So yes, I thought, this would be a good Sunday to do this. And then I actually looked at the gospel selection for today. And I couldn't find the part about names. I kept looking, I read the passage a couple of times, but I couldn't find anywhere that it mentioned name tags.

Turns out the verse I had in mind, the verse where Jesus says “he calls his own sheep by name...” turns out that verse occurs before the part we heard today.

Turns out, too, when you stop and think about what Jesus is saying there, turns out what it says is that God doesn't need name tags. These are for us. God knows our names. God calls us, each and every one of us, by name: Ewe, and Ram, and Fluffy and Puffy, and Snowflake and Smoky, and Rascal and Rambler... God knows us in all our wonderful variety, our distinctive appearances and personalities, and looks for us when we wander off the path, calls us back when we do.

That we are known, and named, and called by God, is part of what we mean by grace. That God is gracious to us means that God knows us uniquely, and completely, and lovingly. God's grace is specific and abundant, God's grace is overflowing—and we are its recipients. To further illustrate this, just after this sermon we will call people forward by name. We'll first call two little lambs, two little lambs named Lily and Lucas, who today will be splashed with God's grace in the waters of baptism. And we'll also be call forward others names, some other lambs

and some grown up sheep, too, all those names that are listed on the insert, all these new members, who will stand up here, on either side of the baptismal font. Our new members get a great vantage points for the baptisms today, for by joining our church our new members affirm their own baptisms.

So, while it is true that the gospel reading doesn't mention names, the sacrament does.

And, I also couldn't help but notice, as you might have, too, the significance of names in the other readings today, in both the first reading from Acts and again in the epistle reading from John, there is a particular attention to names, to the significance of one name in particular. It is a name that does things, a name that make things happen, brings about good, shows true power. In the reading from Acts, we hear that it is by this name that healing happens; it is by this name that any good deed is done. A person named Peter explains this to people named Annas, and Caiaphas. We might recognize those three names from other gospel readings, from the passion narratives. We might recognize those names and think that Peter should have been cowering in fear before Annas and Caiaphas. Instead he stands before them, and speaks boldly to them. Peter says that he is able to do the good that he does because of the power of this name.

And then in 1st John we hear that it is by this name that we know love. 1st John tells us that it is by this name, by what that person did, that we know what love looks like. And this is crucial, 1st John says, because love isn't just something you say, it is something you do. Love isn't just a word, it is action. 1st John tells us that love is what you do when you believe in this name. That's the definition of believing in this name, showing love in action.

And so the activity continues. Our name tag activity continues, because, in baptism, our names are attached to this name. In baptism we are tagged with this name, and we wear it all the time, like an invisible sticker on our chests, this love that has been poured into our hearts. Let us show it, let us make it manifest in our lives, in what we do, in how we love one another, that all who see us, know who we are.