

“What’s in a Name?”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – October 3, 2021

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

I grew up on a farm and I have known many different types of farmers. Not all farmers are the same. My family grew crops, there are farmers that have livestock. And there are experimental farmers that farm the ocean floors. I don’t know much about farms that focused on livestock but when I go county fairs, I look in the animal barns from time to time. I see the horses, cows and chickens. I admit that I wouldn’t know one breed from another, and it doesn’t really matter to me. But for some, the animals are important. And getting them to be the best animal is what county fairs are all about.

Researcher Catherine Douglas says farmers have always believed that naming the animals has a positive effect. But until now, there has never been any scientific evidence. Her study shows that if a cow, for example isn’t given individual attention, then it’s likely to be uncomfortable around humans and become stressed. A stressed cow releases a hormone called cortisol, which inhibits milk production.

But cow-friendly farmers name their cows and make contact with them from an early age. “They chat to them in passing,” Douglas observes. “They walk among the cows and speak with them.”

As the words to the old hymn “In the Garden” go:

And He walks with me

And He talks with me

And He tells me I am his own

And the joy we share as we tarry there

None other has ever known.

So, cows that are known by name will be happy, calm, and productive. Anonymous cattle are going to be stressed and unproductive.

Makes sense, doesn't it? And God knows that the same applies to us. In Scripture, perhaps the most frequent metaphor for God's children is sheep. But a metaphor is a metaphor. Today, we're talking about cows.

The letter to the Hebrews says that *“LONG AGO GOD SPOKE TO OUR ANCESTORS IN MANY AND VARIOUS WAYS BY THE PROPHETS, BUT IN THESE LAST DAYS HE HAS SPOKEN TO US BY A SON.”* (1:1-2) God sent Jesus to walk among us and speak to us, to show us God's will and God's way by being in relationship with us. Jesus *“IS THE REFLECTION OF GOD'S GLORY AND THE EXACT IMPRINT OF GOD'S VERY BEING, AND HE SUSTAINS ALL THINGS BY HIS POWERFUL WORD.”* (v. 3)

That sounds a great deal like the first chapter of the Gospel of John. *“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD. ... AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND LIVED AMONG US, AND WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY, THE GLORY AS OF A FATHER'S ONLY SON, FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH.”* (1:1, 14)

Here's the point: God has spoken to us by a Son. He sustains all things by his powerful word. The Word became flesh and lived among us.

- Not distant, but with us.
- Not silent, but speaking to us.
- Not harsh, but full of grace and truth.

Hebrews goes on to say that *“THE ONE WHO SANCTIFIES”* — Jesus — *“AND THOSE WHO ARE SANCTIFIED”* — each of us — *“ALL HAVE ONE FATHER.”* For this reason, Jesus isn't ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, saying, *“I WILL PROCLAIM YOUR NAME TO MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL PRAISE YOU.”* (2:12)

Jesus loved to use images from rural life when he was teaching the public about the nature of the God's kingdom. Just picture this down-to-earth and highly human Jesus, out in a field with us. He's a dairy farmer, walking among his cows, calling us brother and sister, and praising God in the middle of the endless herd of humanity. He's addressing us by name, showing us a little kindness and a human touch, and taking the time to get to know us and our odd and unpredictable behavior.

Consider this new metaphor: Like cows, we have a wide range of personalities, from those who want to be first in line to those who insist on being last. Some fuss and fidget, while others are always calm.

Jesus understands this about us and grasps our distinctive identities. We don't often take the time to paint this picture of Jesus. More often, we think of him as our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (*Isaiah 9:6*). Or, we see Jesus as the Rabbi, the Cosmic Christ, the Monk Who Rules the World, the Mirror of the Eternal, the Teacher of Common Sense, or the Liberator.

Jesus comes to help us, like a farmer who cares for us and calls us by name, to make us more productive. Clearly, Jesus wants good milk. And he wants lots of it. Jesus says, *"MY FATHER IS GLORIFIED BY THIS, THAT YOU BEAR MUCH FRUIT AND BECOME MY DISCIPLES."* (*John 15:8*)

We're going to be most productive for God when we are happy and calm, instead of stressed and uncomfortable. Jesus knows this. He knows that we are . . .

- not going to bear much fruit if we are stressed about our salvation.
- not going to give good milk if we feel guilty about not volunteering enough.

- not going to do good work if we are uncomfortable about our theological knowledge.
- not going to be very productive if we feel badly about not being holy enough ... or prophetic enough ... or spiritual enough.

You get the point. It's better to be blessed than stressed. And Jesus came to bless us, not stress us. Or, as John puts it, Jesus came to save us, not to condemn us.

What a difference it makes to know that Jesus loves us and cares for us. He isn't ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, and to walk with us, talk with us and tell us we are his own. But this leaves us with a challenge: we are called to grow in our relationship with Jesus by really working at it, day after day after day.

Jesus loves us exactly as we are — that's the good news. But he loves us too much to let us stay that way, and he wants us to grow in our relationship with him and become more productive. Like any good friendship, marriage, or long-term relationship, we have to give it priority in our lives and really work at it, if it's going to be healthy, life-giving and fruitful.

Like all good cows, let's not forget that our job is to produce.

Amen.