

“That Church Knows Me”

*A sermon by the Rev. Cynthia L. Black, D.D.
Church of the Redeemer, Morristown, New Jersey
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Psalm 23; An excerpt from “The Soul of Politics,” by Jim Wallis; John 10:11-18

Do you ever have that feeling when you see someone, that you know them, you just can't remember why or who they are? I know, some of you are thinking that I'm referring to what happens when we age.... Chalk it up to age or whatever, but you know the feeling, right? That gnawing feeling that you should remember someone, you've met them before, or that they look familiar....

There's a story told about a high-powered insurance company executive who was sent to Sweden to set up a very big deal with European companies; it's supposedly a true story, but even if isn't, we can easily imagine a Wall Street person in his place. His first night in Stockholm he went to a fancy reception at a conference center. Among the guests was a distinguished man who looked familiar to the American but whom he could not quite identify. So he tried to learn who he was by casual conversation about the weather, the reception and so on but nothing clicked. Then he tried another approach, asking him “Well, are you still doing the same thing?” to which the gentleman answered “Oh yes, I'm still the King of Sweden.”

I had a Lutheran colleague who worshipped at a church where I served when she had a Sunday off—she and her husband had two young children, Molly and Gabe. Lori told me once when Molly was about five, that as they drove past my church, Molly pointed to it and said quite delightedly, “That church knows me!” Lori was sure she meant to say, “I know that church,” but the way it came it out was really quite wonderful.

Whether Molly knew it or not, she was expressing a longing we all have to be known. Sure, sometimes we may want to hide in anonymity (introverts, unite!) or try to protect ourselves, but whether we're the king of Sweden or an average person, we like it when someone remembers who we are.

At some point we've all had to make one of those phone calls where we know the person we're calling has no reason to know who we are. We try to think of what we're going to say to get them to remember us... “I'm sure you don't remember me... we met at... I'm a friend of... I heard you speak at such and such.” Aren't you thrilled on those occasions when all you get to say of your prepared speech, is, “My name is Cynthia Black” and they actually remember you? I'm always relieved that I don't have to

continue explaining who I am, but I'm flattered, too. “They know who I am” is a good feeling.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them,” Jesus says in today's gospel. You may not be thrilled at being thought of as a sheep, but it is thrilling to know that God knows each one of us. God knows who I am. God knows who you are.

In the tangible sense, community is where we have a sense of being known. Ideally, the church is a community where we feel known. It may not be the only community we are a part of, but it is one where we should be able to risk being “known” beyond a superficial level. Ideally, it is one where we can be accepted, before *and* after we are “known.”

Scott Peck (the author of *A Road Less Traveled*, and many books since) was speaking at a workshop on community and he asked participants to break into small groups and risk sharing something of themselves with each other. During a break a woman came up to him and started telling him about a painful divorce she was going through. After a minute Peck asked her why she didn't share this with her small group. She looked at him dumbfounded and said, “You don't understand. Three people who go to my church are in that group!”

Wendy Wright in her book, *The Rising*, writes, “The importance of supporting communities, groups of people who will shepherd each other to the green pastures of God's promise, cannot be overestimated. The need has been known for centuries. We are given life by community. We come to community thirsty to drink and hungry to be fed. We bring our foundational desires to know a shepherd's care, to be led, sheltered, and restored.”

According to Gallup, the majority of us need to believe life is meaningful and has a purpose; we have a need to have a sense of community and deeper relationships, to be appreciated and respected, to be listened to and heard, and to feel that we are growing in faith.

Yesterday the most amazing thing happened here. Seven Roman Catholic women were ordained priests. Seven women didn't wait for Rome to say, “it's your turn now...” No, the women, part of a movement called Roman Catholic Women Priests, have been ordained by bishops in apostolic succession, and can now, in a

sacramental way, help others to be known and to feel known by God.

As the women arrived at the church on Friday for the rehearsal for the service, I was greeting them at the door and welcoming them. One of the women was the bishop—as I put out my hand to introduce myself (none of the women were in clericals and I had no idea she was the bishop), she said, “Oh, I know who you are; I’m an ecumenical member of the Episcopal Women’s Caucus and I used to love reading what you wrote when you were the President.” She knew me. I was known.

This afternoon, we will host a memorial service for someone who died, who was not a member of Redeemer. Later this week, we will be the rain venue for an exhibit that aims to reduce suicide among young people.

All of these things, from ordination to funeral to mental health awareness and many more are part of the fabric of hospitality that is Redeemer. All of these are part of the way that we can be community, not only for ourselves, but for others, too.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if anyone who’s ever worshipped here or participated in any kind of activity here could say, “That Church knows me” the way my friend’s daughter did? The feeling of being known is a good feeling, whether you are the King of Sweden or the person who vacuums his office. And that’s the promise that God holds out to us in today’s gospel.