

“On being known” a sermon based on John 10:11-18 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 25 April 2021 by Kerry Enright.

Diversity. In this congregation there are people who do not know what a typewriter is and people who do not know what facebook is, people who communicate mainly electronically and people without a cellphone. People live in Waikouaiti in the north, Brighton in the south, Middlemarch in the East and Portobello in the West, and many places in-between. There are people who are straight and people who are gay, women and men and people who do not identify with a particular gender. There are people who are single and people in relationships, people who are married and people who are widowed and people who are divorced. There are people whose heritage is anglo-celtic, people who are Maori, people from Asia, from America, from Africa, from Europe and other places, people who identify with nations of the Pacific. There are people in their nineties and people not yet ten, people who have lived in Dunedin all their life and people who shifted here recently. People who speak many languages and people who speak one. Some people live in boarding houses, some in colleges, some in rented accommodation, some board, some flat, some own their own homes and some are confined to home or a room. Some have no savings and some have millions. Some are looking for work, some work, some have retired. There are people who cannot walk, people who cannot hear and people who cannot see.

There are people who have experienced many different congregations in different countries or cities and there are people who have spent nearly all their years associated with this congregation. There are people who cannot remember being away from the church, people who have come to faith in recent times and people who never had anything to do with a church until they came here. There are people with a deep understanding of the scriptures and people who are just beginning to learn what the Bible is for. There are people who have prayed for decades and people who are only now beginning to pray and people yet to pray. There are people for whom Christian imagery is familiar and people who are hearing images for the first time. There are people who have been Presbyterian from birth and people whose first experience of Presbyterianism is in this congregation. There are people for whom god is a metaphor for the most worthy of human aspirations and people who believe God interacts with them every moment of every day.

There are people who are used to raising their arms in worship, singing songs, and for whom guitars and drums are normal. And there are people whose style is subdued. There are people who sing hymns and people who have never sung hymns before.

There are people who have not worshipped with a choir and organ and people who cannot remember anything else. There are people whose faith is sure, even when they doubt, and people barely holding on, people for whom talking about experiencing God is normal and people who don't know what to make of that. There are people who would not know what to do when a church person visited and some who ask why people don't visit. There are people who like this minister very much and people who can't stand him, people moving into faith and people moving out of faith, people who relish change and people who resent it every step of the way.

And we have only just scratched the surface.

Diversity. One of the great gifts of being church. So how does unity work?

It doesn't work when we treat the church like any other organisation, like rotary or the local bowling club or any social group. We are not volunteers in an organisation or members of a club or admirers of music or keepers of inherited ritual or protectors of a heritage or lobbyists for our view. We are not bound in the church by any common interest or shared preference or family connection. When we try to apply such categories, we exclude or isolate or sideline people. We fail to reflect God's diversity. To make those bodies work, people resort to concepts of obligation and duty and voluntarism that don't work in a church.

As the theologian Moltmann said, a church is not birds of a feather flocking together.

So what about unity?

The only aspect people in the church are to have in common is a sense of moving towards Jesus Christ. Christ is the one who draws us together and turns us to each other and to the world. Christ is big enough and inclusive enough to enable a church to be church. Our diversity witnesses to the power of Christ to hold us. God is decisively present in a lovingly inclusive Christ from whom springs our unity and our relationships with each other.

My old minister Owen Baragwanath used to speak of how people could wander around the mountain in search of each other, calling out and not hearing each other. Only as they moved towards the summit did they move towards each other. Only in moving towards the Christ together do we encounter each other more deeply and learn how to relate to each other. The power of Christ is what enables diversity and sustains unity. We are invited to trust that power.

Which brings us to the image of good shepherd. Now in many ways the Biblical concept of God as shepherd doesn't work in New Zealand. When I was ten my cousin who was a sheep farmer introduced me to docking, cutting off the tails of sheep. "You stand over here Kerry against this fence." When he cut off the tail, the blood spurted straight at me and I fainted. He knew I would. I was a townie. He wanted me to know how tough farmers were. The good shepherd is no softie.

Biblical scholars suggest that the translation that speaks of the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep is not the best one. Better to translate as "risking life for the sheep". It is a smelly, risky, uncertain, unpredictable and dangerous occupation. In Biblical imagery, the shepherd is to lead, guide, feed, protect and seek lost sheep. The goodness of the shepherd is in knowing and being known by the sheep, gathering the sheep together and risking one's life for the sheep. God is a good shepherd. Jesus is a good shepherd. By contrast, the hired hand is there to do a job, to perform a function, to enact a transaction, to fulfil a duty. I will do this for you and you do this for me. Contractual.

Scott Greer who is a professor of sociology and urban studies notes how transactional patterns of life find communal expression in what he calls communities of limited liability. Don't risk too much and if the losses are too great, and my needs are not being met, then withdraw, get out. Communities of limited liability. Hired hands. Transactional arrangements.

Whereas the church is a covenant people, in which people risk themselves for others, especially people who are vulnerable or broken-hearted or oppressed, people who are captives and prisoners. Covenant people, shepherd people, are driven by notions of solidarity and community. They see themselves as part of a body together in which they encourage each other and attend to each other and especially those who are not of the fold.

This is a gritty and challenging gift. One writer puts it like this ... "As the Good Shepherd, Jesus loves the obstinate and the lost. He lives at the edges of polite society, out in the wild, untamed places of the world. His life remains perpetually in danger. He faces again and again the mockery and abandonment of the hirelings, who consider his self-sacrificial vocation absurd. Because he's in it for the long haul, he not only frolics with lambs, but wrestles with wolves. He not only tends the wounds of his beloved rams and ewes; he buries them when their time comes."

There are few more life-changing experiences than that of being fully known, and loved just as we are. Being known and yet being accepted, whoever we are, however we are. That is what drew me to the church as a student, a quality as intimate and personal as that. And the moment I experienced it most dramatically was when, after a short conversation, my minister invited me to kneel with him in front of his desk. And then he led in prayer. A deep sense of being known and loved and held washed over me. He wasn't the one who knew me. He took me with him to the one who did, to God the good shepherd.

Over the next months, Knox is going to be planning how we can be followers of the shepherd together. The Reverend Peg Pfab is a retired minister from the United States and is working with folk to refresh how we connect with each other and beyond the gathered congregation, the joy of being with people so that they experience being known by Christ.

Prayer – God, grant us again your great spirit, that our diversity may flourish and our unity deepen. In Christ. Amen.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



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