

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 8, 2022

ACTS 9:36-43 | PSALM 23 | REVELATION 7:9-17 | JOHN 10:22-30

There's a scene in James Martin's book *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* where he describes going to the countryside around the Sea of Galilee where Jesus lived and taught.<sup>1</sup> When he looks around, there's this type of plant he keeps seeing. And (I'm paraphrasing) he asks his guide what they are, and the guide responds, "Those are mustard plants." And a lightbulb goes off in his head. He realizes that Jesus didn't talk about mustard seeds because they were particularly important. Jesus talked about mustard seeds because they were there.

When Jesus wants to explain who he is or what the kingdom of God is like, he uses an image that people know and understand and says, "Something like that."

This is cute at first. But after a while it starts to get extremely frustrating. In today's gospel reading, the Pharisees ask who Jesus is. And they add a little extra note to the end of it. "Tell it to us plainly." Basically, *Let's knock it off with the metaphors. Who are you?* And how does Jesus answer? *Well, I guess I'm sort of like a shepherd.*

When Jesus reaches for that shepherd image, it's one that people get. One of the most remarkable about shepherding in the Bible is how common it is. Abraham, Jacob, and Amos are shepherds. If you go back to Genesis, we have images of female shepherds like Rachel.<sup>2</sup> There's some evidence that children would have done some shepherding as well. So most of the people hearing this know shepherds, and many of them have probably done it at some point, too.

That's probably not the case for us. When Jesus says he's a shepherd, we're probably thinking, *I don't really need one of those.* But remember, Jesus didn't talk about shepherds because they were particularly important. Jesus talked about shepherds because they were there.

So instead of giving you a history lesson on first century shepherding practices in the ancient near east—a lesson which you are as uninterested in hearing as I am unqualified in giving—let's just pick one image from this story and try to work through it might mean for us. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." Jesus knows us.

We have sort of an ambivalent relationship with being known and knowing others. Even if other people can know us, do we really want them to? We might feel proud of some things, maybe a sense of guilt about others. When we share news through a graduation announcement, a Christmas card, a social media post, there are

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<sup>1</sup> Somewhere in James Martin, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Harper Collins, 2014). Don't have my copy on me.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 29:9. The root here, translated as "kept" in the NRSV, is קָנַן, the root for "feed" or "pasture." So it's framed as an action, but not necessarily as an occupation. More citations are in the Phil Ruge-Jones column for this Sunday in *Currents in Theology and Mission*.

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things we're choosing not to share. There are parts of our lives that we're happy to share with the world, and parts that we'd probably prefer to keep under wraps.

And knowing others is even trickier. Sometimes the difficulties are sort of comical. Maybe you've had that experience where someone recommends a movie that they're sure you'll love or gives you a gift that's perfect for you. And you think *Do you even know me at all?* I was chatting with one of our congregants recently who was talking about how much I liked eating salmon. No idea where they got that from.

But sometimes the inability to know hits harder. Maybe you've been married to someone for a few decades when they turn out to be a vastly different person than you thought. Or you're cleaning out a deceased relative's home when you discover something that changes how you thought of them. It's not just one more piece of information, but it makes you reevaluate everything else about them. As Philip Roth writes in *American Pastoral*, "Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you."

For us, knowing is partial. It's fits and starts. It's filling in the blanks. It's always a little unsure of itself. But for Jesus, knowing is different. In St. John's gospel, knowing always involves relationship. There's no such thing as "book knowledge" or "theoretical knowledge" or—that phrase I find myself using at synod assembly—"not knowing someone, but knowing *of* someone." Knowledge comes through communion with others. There is no knowledge that isn't related to experience.<sup>3</sup> You notice this in the way that Jesus talks about the Father. He says, "I know the Father and the Father knows me." Jesus doesn't mean he is aware of who the Father is. He means they're in a kind of deep and abiding relationship with each other. Knowing is relationship. Intimacy. Trust. Mutual flourishing. Not just facts.

And not only does Jesus know the Father. Jesus knows us. When Jesus says that he knows us, he means that he's wrapped up in our experience of life. Intimacy. Trust. Mutual flourishing. Not just facts. This is not someone you need to explain the frustrations and perils of life to. There's no experience that we have in life that Jesus is somehow unable to understand.

It's the love of Jesus that brings those two relationships together. It's as if Jesus takes that relationship, that knowing he has with the Father, and hands it off to us. And invites us into that new kind of relationship with God. It's almost like saying *You can stand before God the way I stand before God. You can talk to God the way I talk to God. You can be in communion with God the way I'm in communion with God.*

And the same goes for our relationships with others. When we share in Jesus's relationship with God, we can relate to others the way Jesus relates to them. We can encounter them the way Jesus encounters them. We can serve them the way Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> There's a nice discussion of this in the John 10 chapter of Karoline M. Lewis, *John* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014).

serves them. You heard a nice example of that in today's reading from Acts where Peter raises Tabitha from the dead. The risen Christ continues to act in the world in and through the life of the church. Jesus gives us his relationship with God the Father so that we can participate in his relationships with others.

Here's the best part of all this. Jesus loves us and cares for us apart from our ability to be worthy of love or deserving of affection. In fact, one of the things that's funny about this gospel reading is that Jesus goes off on this long answer about his followers even though the Pharisees didn't ask him about his followers at all. When the Pharisees ask *Who are you?* Jesus responds *Someone who loves my followers.* Jesus's understanding of who he is wrapped up in his relationship with, his knowing, all of us. Jesus knows us not because of who we are but because of who he is.

So this relationship frees us up to claim a little bit more of our humanity. It isn't like our relationship with a teacher where we need to avoid asking dumb questions and convince them we're smart. Or our relationship with a romantic interest where we need to avoid boring anecdotes and convince them to find us worthwhile. Or our relationship with an employer where we need to avoid making mistakes and justify our worth.

Because Jesus is who he is, we can be who we are. People who are flawed and imperfect, sure. But a people freed to be in relationship with God and one another through the risen Christ. Lucky us.

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