identity theft

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.’ Jn 10:3b, 27-28

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus says that he knows his flock, each of us by name. This is extraordinary, because for Christians the same God who lit up the sun and crafted the universe knows and cares for each of us by name. Equally mind boggling is the reverse of this tenant of our faith. That we also know God by name. That since the coming of Jesus into the world, we are now on a first-name basis with God; something unthinkable in the pre-Christian world. This is all beautiful theology to think in our heads, but what is most beautiful are the consequences if we apply it in our lives.

Think with me for a moment. Who calls us by our names, our first names? Loved ones, friends, and close co-workers. To know and use someone’s name, particularly a first name, is to have some claim on that person, some expectation of intimacy and access. Names, especially first names, are powerful things. Not everyone should have access to our names, because their power can be used for selfish ends. I’m sure we’ve all gotten many a phone call like I got just yesterday: “Hello is this Jason?” ”Yes it is,” I answer annoyed and think to myself, who are you and why are you pretending we know each other to sell me something. These sales calls are just an annoyance, but in today’s virtual world, people don’t just misuse personal information, they try to outright steal it. For many weeks, many different members of our parish council got a similar email from “Hovnan.”

*Hi David. I need you to initiate a bank transfer payment of $6,180.00 today for urgent maintenance issues. Please acknowledge the receipt of this message so I can forward you the payment details. Thanks Hovnan.*

Nowadays people don’t just borrow your name to make a sale, they try and steal it from you, your church and friends! And though the technology used today is new, this kind of deceit and theft is as old as humankind. Jesus warns us about it in this week’s reading from John. There are many thieves and bandits in this life, Jesus warns us, who will call your name and disguise their voice to be like mine-like your Good Shepherd-in order to create a false sense of intimacy with you. Don’t believe them. Now you might have said to yourself that you wouldn’t have fallen for the Hovnan scam, like two people on our parish council almost did. But even so, all of us are vulnerable to the deceptions of the evil one, who has tried to steal our true identities from the first days in the Garden and continues his work today. There is an old folk saying relevant to today’s lesson that I have found to be profoundly true; ‘The Devil calls you by your Sins. Christ calls you by name.” We all have this voice calling us at different times in our hearts and heads. It’s the one that tells you to be ashamed of who you are, the one who whispers that you’ll never be enough, the one that justifies your anger, fear and control of others as self-defense. The life-long training of a Christian, therefore, is to learn discernment; how to distinguish the voice of the Lord from the cacophony of less healthy voices.

And though this the slow work of a lifetime, the more we listen to God’s voice in scripture, in worship and prayer, the more we attune ourselves to it and here him calling us by our true names. His tone, we are reminded in today’s reading, is like that of a loving father and of a shepherd looking after his flock. His promise, to those who comes to know Him on a first name basis, is different than anything the world can offer. “I came that (you) may have life, and have it abundantly.” With Jesus, we have the chance to not simply survive, but thrive. To have a sense of purpose and fulfillment; to know and be known on a first name basis with the creator of everything seen and unseen. This is a great gift, and a great promise from a God who does not lie!

Abundant life is not something that anyone can sell to you or steal from you. It is not even something that we can earn or achieve on our own by accessing our deepest self. Rather, it is a gift, the sheer gift of a God who loves us enough to lay down his life for us. There are so many thieves and bandits in this world who would disguise their voice and call us by name, with the intent of robbing us of life, cheating us of our true potential. And so Jesus comes as the gatekeeper and good shepherd, the one who knows his sheep - intimately and truly - and calls out to each of us by name, so that in the course of our lifetimes we might come to know and live the most intimate truth about God's great and victorious love for us., now and always, amen.

-Parts of this sermon adapted from ‘Abundant Life’ by David Lose