

Pastor's Message - Christmas Day (2022)

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

A city fellow was tooling down a country road when his car sputtered to a complete stop near a field filled with cows. The driver, getting out to see what was the matter, noticed one of the cows looking at him.

"I believe it's your radiator," said the cow.

The man nearly jumped right out of his shoes! He ran to the nearest farmhouse and knocked on the door. "A cow just gave me advice about my car!" he shouted, waving his arms frantically back toward the field.

The farmer nonchalantly leaned out beyond the door frame to glance down the field. "The cow with two big black spots on it?" the farmer asked slowly.

"Yes! Yes! That's the one!" the excited man replied.

"Oh. Well, that's Ethel," the farmer said, turning back to the man. "Don't pay any attention to her. She doesn't know a darn thing about cars."

That's bad advice because studies have shown that when farmers pay attention to their cows they are more productive. In fact, if you call a cow by name, she'll give you more milk. Show a little kindness and a personal touch, and she'll be more productive.

Perhaps the same is true for us.

A study out of England, reported in *USA Today*, reveals that affectionate treatment of cattle — including the giving of names to cows — can increase the amount of milk they give. The average cow produces about 2,000 gallons of milk a year, but if you know her by name, she'll give you an extra 68 gallons.

There's a message here for the church today. So let's milk this study for all it's worth. Trust us: This is "moos" you can use.

Most people will name their pets. 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."

Consider then, the words to the old hymn "In the Garden":

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.*

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 the Letter to the Hebrews that we heard today, the writer 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).

Jesus loved to use images from rural life when he was teaching the public about the nature of the God 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.

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. Within any given herd there's going to be a well-defined hierarchy, with one cow usually acting as the leader.

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, as historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan points out in his book *Jesus Through the Centuries*, we see Jesus as the Rabbi, the Cosmic Christ, the Monk Who Rules the World, the Universal Man, the Mirror of the Eternal, the Teacher of Common Sense, the Poet of the Spirit, or the Liberator.

Never the Dairy Farmer.

But there's something to be said for an image of Jesus as a farmer in the pasture with us. It's close to the biblical image of the shepherd, the one who "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." He goes ahead of them, says Jesus, "and the sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3-4). This is the Christ who "for a little while was made lower than the angels," says the letter to the Hebrews (2:9), and who walked among us, making us happy and calm. This is all for our benefit, says Hebrews, "For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham" (v. 16).

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. "My Father is glorified by this," says Jesus, using a slightly different agricultural metaphor, "that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (John 15:8).

It would be wrong to push this image too far and begin thinking of ourselves as actual cows, lining up to be milked. That's not a pretty picture. Besides, our output isn't supposed to be milk or cheese or butter; instead, says Hebrews, it is to include mutual love, hospitality to strangers, concern for prisoners, and a life "free from the love of money" (13:1-5).

The reason God sent Jesus to be Emanuel, God-with-us, is that God knows that *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 green enough ... or holy enough ... or prophetic enough ... or spiritual enough.

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. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). People who believe in Jesus aren't condemned, and this assurance of salvation should be enough to help us become happy, calm and productive disciples of Christ.

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*.

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. That's why God came to us that we might come to Him and know Him and love Him as He loves us.