

Easter 4, Year B  
John 10: 11-18  
May 3, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, CA

To Know as We Are Known; To Love as We Are Loved:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Not long ago, I attended a class a friend was teaching. He was trying to teach his students the importance of close observation and the distinction between observation and interpretation. My friend brought a painting to class that day—"Christina's World" by Andrew Wyeth—a painting I've loved since I first saw it over forty years ago. After introducing the exercise, he walked around the room showing the painting to the students. Each had about ten seconds to take it in. He repeated the process—again giving each student a few seconds to take another look—and then he put the painting away. He asked his students to write down what they saw. Then he asked them to share their observations.

Everyone saw a woman lying in a field. Everyone saw structures in the background. And then the observations diverged widely and interpretations began to seep in. Some saw what they took to be birds in the sky. Others saw an item of clothing drying on a line. One student pointed out two parallel lines pointing to the structures which another student took to be a house and an outhouse. I noticed a line of verticals I took to be poles supporting electrical wires though in retrospect I think they were phone wires. Those who knew the story of the painting saw a crippled woman; others just saw a woman in a field.

As I listened to their observations, I was struck by how much more I saw and wondered about when I was part of a community of observation. Though I've seen the original and even owned a print of Christina's World, I never before noticed the birds hovering in the air or the clothes hanging on the line. I never before asked myself what she was doing in that field. And I never asked if there would be anyone to help her. I had my answer. She was crippled. She was sad. She longed for something else. She was on her own. As I listened to the other voices in the room, I found my wonder stirred, my understanding and my knowing changed, my world expanding.

We live in a world that isolates us, that leads us to believe that knowing is something we do on our own. Ours is a culture that fosters the notion that being known involves being known for what we have or where we live or the work we do or the color of our skin or our gender or our sexual identity and hence reduces us to categories on a census form. We know what knowing and being known are all about. So we gloss right over Jesus' words, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" not even stopping to linger at what it means to be known by Love himself or to wonder about how we know Him.

What a gift it is to be known by God—to be seen and accepted as we are, to be loved, to be welcomed into God's fold—not for the opinions we hold or how we dress or how old or young we are but just for being us. The kind of knowing that extends to all the

sheep—both those in the fold and those in other folds as well. God’s knowing love sets no limits. Remember what Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also....So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

In the passage we hear today, Jesus is talking with the Pharisees. They know who’s in and who’s out, who’s welcome and who’s not. Those who keep the purity laws are in; those whose life work or life station or life condition are in some way unclean are out—including shepherds, tax collectors, people who can’t pay the temple tax, women who are menstruating or have given birth—you get the idea. They’ve got God in a box.

But it’s not only the Pharisees who want to put God in a box. Remember how the disciples try to keep Jesus for themselves and for those they think belong within the fold—they try to shoe away the children, they say “Back off” to the hemorrhaging woman, they suggest that Jesus rain down punishment on Samaritans who would block his path.

That tendency to keep God in a box, to seal off access to the living God is not confined to the past. We, too, keep church in a box—closing it in with our ideas of God, our ideas of who’s known and loved by God, and our ideas of how best to worship and serve God. You find this tendency running rife in Christian denominations—the deifying of tradition, the worship of false idols in the refrain of “We’ve always done it this way.” And you find it running rampant in the clergy—our claims of expertise, our reliance on our exclusive knowledge—apostolic succession hijacked and run amok.

But I think there’s more to these attempts at boxing in our living God. Sometimes they come from deep inside us—our fears, our passions, our false selves all conspiring to limit God and in the process limiting us as well. How hard it is to set aside our assumptions. How hard it is to step outside our vantage point. How hard it is to give up our inside advantage.

And yet that’s just what Jesus calls us to do. “I know my sheep and my sheep know me....I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must bring them also....So there will be one flock and one shepherd.” We can’t know God from our perspective alone. We need the other sheep and we need the sheep from other folds. Each of us brings a piece of the puzzle. As the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century protestant theologian Karl Barth once put it, “There is no such thing as an individual Christian.” We are together in Christ. Together we come to know Christ. Together we are called to make space for one another in the in the open sheepfold of God’s limitless love.

We are at a critical juncture in our life as a parish. We are facing enormous challenges. None of us has all the answers. None of us can see the whole picture. Each of us—each and every one of us holds a piece of the puzzle. Like those students in that class, we need one another to get a grasp of the whole and a sense of where God is calling us. But even when we begin to piece together the picture, our knowledge is not complete. You see Jesus has other sheep who are not of our fold. We need them to complete the picture.

