

Recognized  
First Reading: Psalm 23  
Second Reading: John 10:11-18

“Forks. Knives. Spoons ... In that order. Britt-Marie is certainly not the kind of person who judges other people. Far from it.

But surely no civilized person would even think of arranging a cutlery drawer in a different way from how cutlery drawers are supposed to be arranged?

We’re not animals, are we?

It’s a Monday in January. She’s sitting at a desk in the unemployment office. Admittedly there’s no cutlery in sight, but it’s on her mind because it sums up everything that’s gone wrong recently. Cutlery should be arranged as it always has been, because life should go on unchanged. Normal life is presentable ... In normal life you certainly don’t find yourself sitting in the unemployment office.” (Fredrik Backman, *Britt-Marie Was Here*)

In Fredrik Backman’s endearing novel titled, *Britt-Marie Was Here*, we find Britt-Marie suddenly alone, not that her circle of relationships was ever crowded. She had one relationship when you get down to it, and she has just left that relationship after her husband’s mistress showed up at the

hospital following his heart attack. Britt-Marie is 63, she hasn't been employed since the 70's. She's hardly had any contact with her stepchildren, who along with her husband regularly referred to her as a nag-bag. She has no place to live, no job to go to, no friends to support her, and no resources apart from the social worker sitting across the desk from her at the unemployment office.

And let's just say, Britt-Marie is ... unique. She is preternaturally awkward in social settings, and has an exasperatingly exacting view as to what is proper combined with an inability to keep that perspective to herself. Knowing this about herself, she tries to soften her utterances with mixed results. Being kind is not just about what you say, but also about what you hold back from saying. Good intentions are often spoiled by the failure to silence extraneous opinions.

So, after a rocky start, Britt-Marie senses it would be proper to compliment the social worker who could connect her to a job, so she gives it a try, "You have a very modern hairstyle ... It's very courageous of you to wear your hair so short when you have such a large forehead." Oooh! The three point shot doinks off the top of the backboard.

In addition, Britt-Marie is obsessive about cleanliness and order and lists. It doesn't exist unless it's on her carefully curated list. After all, we're not animals, are we? Forks. Knives. Spoons. And, the world shall not survive without one specific brand of cleaning fluid and baking soda.

Well, in spite of the unfortunate haircut remark and her subsequent badgering of the social worker, Britt-Marie was matched with a job ... sort of. It was more of a mismatch, an ill-defined temporary, mistakenly listed position as a caretaker for a run-down recreation center slated to be demolished in a dying and decaying small town whose main employer had up and left, leaving behind a population that a fast-moving society tends to regard as the crumbs at the bottom of a cereal box. At that point the box gets more respect than the crumbs.

Britt-Marie's introduction to the community is the thwack of a soccer ball to the side of her head. She returns to consciousness not where she fell but on the grungy floor of the last standing quasi-commercial establishment in town, a combination pizzeria, coffee shop, health center, car repair shop, bodega; and looking down upon her we find a blind curmudgeon, a wheelchair-bound alcoholic, a lonely policeman, a couple of crotchety coffee

drinkers, and a rag-tag group of grimy kids trying to survive various stages of familial dysfunction. At this point, the reader unavoidably observes — This will not go well. There's not enough liquid cleaner and baking soda in the world that will clean up this picture.

And yet ... in this most unlikely of settings with this most curious collection of spare parts and spare people, this ill-paired succotash is transformed into an actual glorious witness to the power of community and the grace of encouragement.

What makes the difference? Recognition. I see you and you see me, for real, and when that happens, we have the basis for a relationship. Recognition requires equal parts patience, forbearance, mercy, and perseverance, qualities that very often do not come to us naturally or easily. Throw out expectations, toss aside litmus tests, labels, and like-mindedness, and take the time, make the time for patient proximity, step lightly around quirks, and be honest, understanding that being honest is distinct from speaking truth. We can be honest. We seldom own, no scratch that, we never own the unfiltered full truth about ourselves or about anyone else.

Patience. Forbearance. Perseverance. Mercy. Humility in associating your words with truth. Paying attention eye to eye, voice to voice. That's not easy work. That takes time and sustained effort, and when that effort bears no fruit, there has to be a willingness to roll up your sleeves, learn from your mistakes, and try again. Starting with Britt-Marie and mixing in the cast of gonzo characters, we witness none of these characteristics at the outset. Yet, that same soccer ball that kayoed Britt Marie would become a catalyst for transformation.

We gather as those who believe what would make that soccer ball a catalyst is actually the mysterious movement of our triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”* Though our ability to relate to images of shepherds and sheep is surely limited out here in suburbia, Scripture is rife with images of the nomadic pastoral life centered on livestock, shepherds and sheep. Abram was a shepherd when the Lord called him; Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep when he came upon a burning bush. And, of course, David

was courageously protecting his father's sheep before he went out to confront Goliath. The Bible is teeming with this imagery because that is what the people knew.

It is thus no surprise that biblical authors drew on the prevailing awareness of shepherds and sheep to explore and explain the dynamics of the relationship between God and God's people. The Psalmist proclaims, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."* *"Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture."* The same imagery was used to describe those in the role of leadership and the people in their care. To David, the Lord says, *"It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel."*

However, the application of the shepherd imagery to human authorities meant that sin and failure and injustice were also incorporated into the image. By the time of the prophet Ezekiel, Israel and Judah had endured a succession of poor shepherds.

*"Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed*

*the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them ... Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep ...*

*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd ... 'They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them.*

Hearing that promise, a scattered flock, a broken people were given the hope and expectation of a “good” shepherd, who would bring healing, nourishment, and community ... a shepherd who would put the well-being of the sheep before his own.

And so it is, that Jesus, from the line of David, who came as the Word made flesh, reveals himself to be “the good shepherd.” With the language echoing the self-identification of God to Moses, John utilizes the words — *I*

*am ... I am the good shepherd. This Jesus identifies as the one who can be trusted to be, recognized to be the shepherd God promised. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."*

To know and be known, to recognize and be recognized — I see you — You see me — For real — And when this happens, we have the basis for a relationship. Isn't this at the heart of all human hope, even for the likes of Britt-Marie and the pastiche of human struggles seen in the faces she awakens to, looking up from the grungy, and obviously unhygienic floor of this combination pizzeria, car repair, health center, liquor store, and bodega, this last detritus of commerce left in the dying town of Borg? This was her life — felled by a soccer ball, knowing no one, taking on a temporary job in a condemned facility, for which she had no training, or even any clue as to a job description.

"I was waiting here for you to stop looking deceased ... Bloody brats, you know. Bloody soccer. But don't get angry, they weren't aiming at you."

"How do you know if they were aiming at me?"

"They hit you! ...If they aim, they don't hit. These kids bloody terrible at soccer."



Turns out, part of Britt-Marie's temporary duties at the condemned recreation center include being the coach of these bloody terrible soccer players, a task for which she has no skills, focused on a game of which she knows nothing. So, for the bagillionth time, Britt-Marie calls the social worker at the employment center. "What's the first thing you do at a soccer practice?" As if the social worker knows any more about soccer than Britt-Marie.

"I'd say ... but I don't know ... the first thing you do at training ... I mean, is to [call the roll]?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You have a register. You tick off the people who are there."

"A list?"

"Yes...?"

"Britt-Marie has already hung up. She may not know a lot about soccer, but even the gods know that no one is more skilled at lists than Britt-Marie." And armed with her list, a simple roll call finds a crack to let a light through that slowly dispels the fog and the darkness enveloping these scattered sheep; and an unlikely shepherd with enough quirks to speed past

the limits of eccentricity, brings healing to the hurting, and in so doing, discovers healing for herself in the formation of a community.

To know and be known, to recognize and be recognized — I see you — You see me — For real — And when this happens, we have the basis for a relationship.

Elsewhere in John, we hear Jesus, the good shepherd, say to those sheep in his care — *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”* Frederick Buechner observes that the peace that Jesus, the good shepherd, offers “has nothing to do with the things that are going on at the moment he offers it, which are for the most part tragic and terrible things. It is a peace beyond the reach of the tragic and the terrible. It is a profound and inward peace that sees with unflinching clarity the tragic and terrible things that are happening and yet is not shattered by them ... His peace comes not from the world but from something whole and holy within himself which sees the world also as whole and holy because deep beneath all the broken and unholy things that are happening in it even as he speaks, Jesus sees what he calls the kingdom of God.” (Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*)

All his life long, wherever the good shepherd looked, he saw the world and the people in it not in terms simply of their brokenness, but saw the world and you and me and the stranger carrying within us something of the holiness of our origin. Buechner says, “To see the world like that, as Jesus saw it, is to be whole. And sometimes I believe that even people like you and me [and Britt-Marie] see it like that. Sometimes even in the midst of our confused and broken relationships with ourselves, with each other, with God, we catch glimpses of that holiness and wholeness which, no matter how buried and unrecognized, are still part of who we are.”

To glimpse something of that wholeness in each other — To know and be known, to recognize and be recognized — I see you — You see me — For real. Jesus says *“the hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”* And guess what? Even when we cannot see it, the good shepherd can, and will not rest until all the sheep have a community. Jesus says, *“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”*

And sometimes, all the shepherd needs to get things going is a soccer ball and a list for roll call, or maybe a bible and an open sanctuary, but wherever and with whatever, the good shepherd is there to open our eyes so that we may recognize each other — for real — and together follow the shepherd. Amen.