

John 10:11-18
April 22, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!
Amen.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd. ¹⁷ "This is why the Father loves me: I give up my life so that I can take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I give it up because I want to. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it up again. I received this commandment from my Father." (CEB)

Sometime ago I came across a story, which as I recall, another colleague of mine had posted on Facebook. The story itself was from an Omaha television channel, KETV (www.ketv.com). I now read verbatim from the actual interviewⁱ.

John Dutcher will tell you what he thought of Muslims. "I hated Muslims," Dutcher admitted. The Omaha man, who lives in a modest Millard apartment said the deep-seated hate came following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. "There's a Mosque out here in Millard and I even thought about, how you hear people put bacon on their doors. That's how bad I was thinking," admitted Dutcher.

But then something happened. Lutheran Family Services began placing refugee families in his apartment building. A Syrian family moved in across the hall. An Afghan family moved in downstairs. Six Muslim families live in his building. Dutcher is surrounded by the people he hated.

"When they first moved in, I didn't know how to feel. I kinda had a hatred," Dutcher said. Dutcher, 61, said the Muslims moving in, moved him. "These two ladies came over and I felt compelled to offer my assistance. They don't speak English and I offered if they needed anything they can come knock on my door, and boy have they," said Dutcher.

Dutcher's heart started softening. "It took this to wake me up." He noticed his new neighbors needed him and he needed them. Children's bicycles filled the hallways, instead of trash left behind by his previous drug addict neighbors. "Crack pipes and things like that, " he said.

Children's laughter fills the building. "It's music to my ears and better than what was here before." Children knock on his door for help too. "They say, 'John, John, John, bicycle pump.'" Dutcher keeps the pump near the door to help his little neighbors.

He's gotten to know his neighbors and learned of their struggles and why they needed to leave their own countries. "They didn't want to just come over here and get welfare. They come over here because they were forced to, " Dutcher said. "I'm sure none of them wanted to lose their jobs, lose their homes and like that over there." "If you would have asked me before they moved in, I would have said 'oh yeah keep em out.' Until you get to know these people, they're amazing."

Fatima Shah is a volunteer with Lutheran Family Services, who has placed 21 Syrian families with a total of 116 people in Omaha since October of 2015. She said the families living in Dutcher's apartment complex love having him around. "John looks out for them. If anything goes wrong, they call John," Shah said. She said when Dutcher confided in her his previous thoughts of hate, she was shocked. "He wants the people to understand who have this hatred, how to get over it, go get to know them so you can understand what you really are hating," she said. "He preaches this to everyone, if you hate a Muslim, go get to know one." "They took that hatred out of me. I never knew how badly someone could hate someone they don't even know, " Dutcher said tearfully.

In our gospel passage Jesus states, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep." This is a matter of fact and certainty. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows us. We Lutheran's like to talk a lot about GRACE. In fact, the confirmation kids and I talked a lot about GRACE this past Wednesday. What is it? What does it look like? How do we explain it? This passage is about grace. Notice, there is nothing we need to

do for the Good Shepherd to know us. He just knows us and his knowing us results in our knowing him. But there is infinitely more to this relationship we have with the Good Shepherd. Because He knows us and we in turn know him we are also invited into the relationship Jesus has with God. This is GRACE. Being known by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Being known and loved by Jesus even when we falter to hear his voice or return to him the same love he shows us. Being known and loved when we fail to get to know other sheep beyond Jesus' own flock here at Bethany. This is GRACE that he continues to know us. Because this isn't some one and done thing Jesus is talking about here. No, this is a continuous action without end. Yet, there is more. Not only does the Good Shepherd know us, but he goes so far as to lay down his life for the sheep. This is GRACE.

John Dutcher took a chance and he made a choice. It would have been all too easy simply to remain in his apartment, ignore his Muslim neighbors from Syria, and hold onto his hatred. Yet, he did something new and got to know his new neighbors. And the results are astounding. The joy that came from taking a chance sprung forth a new and life-giving relationship. A once hardened heart full of hate transformed into one full of love. Restoration. Reconciliation. Resurrection. It's the story of Easter! But there's more. Dutcher, in sharing his story has now become an advocate for refugees

and seeing beyond our fears to see them simply as our neighbors in need. All by getting to know his neighbor.

I wonder what the world would look like if we took the time to simply get to know our neighbor a little bit better. I wonder what our church would like if we did the same. What if we looked beyond the color of skin? What if we looked beyond one's religious affiliation or lack of one? What if we looked beyond all those things we disagree with one another on? What if we looked beyond something we have heard our neighbor, which may not be true? What if we looked beyond the clothes they wear? What if we looked beyond political party they affiliate with? What if we looked beyond whether they are straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning? What if we looked beyond the jail cell they are confined to? What if we looked beyond our own prejudices, biases, and fears? What would the world look like if we took the time to get to know our neighbor, really and genuinely know our neighbor? What would our church look like? Might we see one another with the eyes Jesus sees all his beloved and precious sheep?

Thanks and praise be to God that Jesus knows us! This is true. For the Bible tells us so! Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.ketv.com/article/change-of-heart-for-omaha-man-who-hated-muslims/8690536>