

He Knows His Sheep by Name...
a Message to the Teddy Bears at our Church

John 10:1-11

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I heard that some of you are very concerned with attendance at our church during the times of the Coronavirus Crisis. I understand that. When I look out on a Sunday morning, I can see that there are less of you than when we began this time of isolation more than seven weeks ago. I know you are concerned about our attendance. This morning I would like to talk to all of you who are still here, who are still in our pews. I want you to know you are not forgotten. I want you to know you will never be forgotten. I want you to know that when Jesus promised that he is the Good Shepherd who knows all of his sheep by name, he meant that he knows your name. Jesus knows the name of each and every one of you. So today I want all of you who are still here in the pews to come and join me at the front. I want to talk with you today and tell you that Jesus has not forgotten you. So please come forward...all you teddy bears who remain in our pews...please come forward and sit with me right here in the front.

Just like when I counted you last week, it looks like there are still seven of you teddy bears who are in our pews at the Dunn's Corners Church. Sometimes we have 30 or 40, but over time we have less bears in the pews. I know the seven of you must be feeling lonely. So, I wanted to tell you where some of your friends have gone. You see, it is actually very good news that there are not as many of you in our pews as there used to be.

There is a young man whose liver is not working the way it should. This makes him very sick. His family is worried about him. His family is praying for him. This young man's grandmother is a good friend of ours at the church. She has helped many people when they have had sad times. After this young man's grandmother asked us to pray for her grandson, she reached out and picked up one of you and she took him to her grandson. Her grandson lives in Massachusetts. Now her grandson in Massachusetts can hold his little teddy bear close to his heart and know that we are praying for him.

One Sunday several years ago our friend Susan visited from Texas. We had fun going down to the ocean and eating seafood and remembering good times. Susan also told us a friend from Texas had cancer and she was losing her battle. Our friend was really sick. When Susan attended our church, she sat next to one of your friends. Susan read the words that each of you have on your chest and she decided she needed to take that bear with her. That bear got to travel all the way to Houston, Texas. Susan told us that teddy bear stayed by the side of our friend right up until the time she died. That was very sad. But it made us feel better knowing she had one of you beside her to remind her she was not alone. It made us feel better knowing she was being covered in prayer.

A young woman found out she was carrying a baby in her tummy. She was pregnant. She was so excited. And then something went wrong. She had what we call a miscarriage. A miscarriage is heartbreaking in so many ways. A mommy loses a life that she was so looking forward to, and many times nobody knows that she lost that precious life. While that young mommy was feeling so sad after losing her baby, someone picked up one of you and sent him all the way to Missouri. During a very sad time the mommy found her teddy bear helped her feel better. She even wrote us a letter back. "I treasure the bear that was sent to me after I suffered a loss." She even put a little  Then she told us that when her mother-in-law got sick, her mother-in-law received a bear, and every time her mother-in-law went back and forth to the hospital for chemotherapy, her little bear traveled with her!

When this very serious Coronavirus broke out, one mommy asked us to pray for her daughter. The daughter is all grown up and works as a nurse in Milwaukee. Because she works as a nurse and she got sick with symptoms of the virus, the mommy was very scared. One of you climbed into a box and went through the mail all the way to Milwaukee, and now the mommy's grown up daughter who is a nurse is doing fine. Another one of you got inside another package and flew down to Florida to be with a friend's sister who was going through surgery. The sister is fine. Whew! We are glad when things turn out fine. When it doesn't turn out fine, we shed tears. One of the people who helped write the bible said some words that tell us there will be happy times and there will be sad times. He wrote, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." Sometimes a teddy bear is in someone's arms when they laugh and rejoice. And sometimes a teddy bear is in someone's arms when they cry, and their hearts are filled with sadness. It is very important to know God is with us in our happy times and in our sad times. God is always with us.

I have a picture of one of your friends who made it all the way to Phoenix, Arizona. A young woman's mother became very sick with the Coronavirus. Her mother had to be on a ventilator for 27 days. Thankfully, the mother is now recovering. When the young woman opened her package with a teddy bear, she wrote to us and said, "Thank you very much for this 'Bear Hug' that came all the way from Rhode Island." And she sent a picture of her teddy bear. I want to hold it up because it has the little sign that all of you have on your tummy.

"This cuddly friend has sat among the Congregation of Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian in Westerly, Rhode Island. It has heard the Word read, prayers prayed, songs of praises sung, testimony given, and the sermon preached. It has been given love and has loved others. Now it comes to you with the blessings of worship, love and the prayers of our congregation."

I know there are only seven of you here now. I know you miss the days when there were many more teddy bears. But you see, I wanted you to know that all of the bears who are not here are somewhere where they are really needed. Someday you won't be here. Someday you will have a new home. Someday a little boy or girl might clutch you close and even have a tea party with you, or an older person who needs a very special hug will wrap you up, or someone who is sick, or someone who is sad. We don't know where you will end up, but we will be happy that you have been able to take your bear hug to a place where it is really needed, and where it really makes a difference.

You might not realize just how much your little teddy bears matter. A friend told me this story. She said when she first started teaching in an elementary school many years ago, she was teaching a special education class. She said, "I had a theme for my class. The theme was Care Bears. At the time there were a whole series of bears named Care Bears. I collected quite a few of them and always had them around my classroom. We had Tender Heart, Friend Bear, Cheer Bear, Sunshine Bear, Birthday Bear, Grumpy Bear and several others. Each bear had a purpose and mission within my classroom. I had a student, David, who was learning disabled. David came from a family that had lots of challenges. He did not have much self-confidence, and he was very hard on himself. With all his challenges he was still a sweet boy. He made quite a bit of gains in my class and he cried when he had to leave my class after being with me for 2 years. When David was having a hard day, I would often get him out of his slump by handing him Grumpy Bear. After I handed him Grumpy Bear he would smile. I fondly referred to him as my Grumpy Bear. One very special day some 9 years later, when the little boy had grown up and he was now a high school student, David came back to visit me. He was tall and handsome and came into my classroom, which was still filled with all those Care Bears. He gave me a hug and tenderly picked up Grumpy Bear. He asked, 'Am I still your Grumpy Bear?' With a big smile I said, 'Of course you are. But now you are Tender Heart.'" You little teddy bears, you have no idea what a difference you make.

I know you have noticed that there are not as many of you as there used to be. I know you have noticed our attendance is down a bit. But did you notice that one of our friends came back today just to be with you? He heard you were all feeling a little sad. When he left our church, he did not go all the way to Arizona or Florida. He did not go to Massachusetts, Milwaukee or Missouri. This friend only went to a home in Westerly, just a mile from our church. It's a good thing he did not go very far. This friend is bigger than any of you. In fact, this bear is huge. I don't think we could fit him in a box and mail him. Look at how big he is. Here is the picture of the day he arrived at church. And here is a picture of him with his happy home. You can see how happy he makes his friend Judy. Look at that big smile on Judy's face. Well, since he did not go far away, when our friend heard you all were feeling sad, he asked if he could come back and try to cheer you up. And here he is...look right up in our pulpit. Have you ever seen a bear so big? I think I am going to name him Bubba the Big Bear.

It makes me happy to look up and see Bubba the Big Bear. And it makes me happy to see the picture of Judy with Bubba the Big Bear. The smile on Judy's face says it all. Each one of you bears brings great joy. Bubba the Big Bear, thanks for coming back today to cheer us all up.

As happy as I am that Bubba the Big Bear is in our pulpit, there is something that makes me even more happy. When you look at Bubba the Big Bear, he is so big it is hard to see anything else. But if you can look behind Bubba, and beyond Bubba, you will see something very important. The cross is behind Bubba the Big Bear. The cross is where Jesus gave his life for us. The cross is where Jesus died. Jesus had told us he knows us all by name, whether it is a bear name like Big Bubba or Tender Heart or even Grumpy, or whether it is a name of a girl or boy like Tammy or Tommy, Bobby or Barbara. Whatever your name is, Jesus knows us all by name. Jesus calls us his sheep. He said, "I know all my sheep by name." Jesus not only knows us, Jesus loves us, each one of us. He loves us by name.

And Jesus, who loves us, says he is our Good Shepherd. Jesus says he is watching over all of us. The way Jesus protects us is by giving his life for us. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." Big Bubba takes up a lot of the picture when he is in the pulpit. But look beyond Bubba the Big Bear, and you see the cross, where our Good Shepherd laid down his life for us. Knowing that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, that Jesus knows us by name, that Jesus loves us, and that Jesus has laid down his life for us, that makes me think of a song that all God's children, humans and bears and sheep and lambs can sing together. Will you sing it with me? It goes like this:

Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.

Amen!