

Apparently, 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. You might even say that perhaps the same is true for us human beings as well.

A study out of England, once reported in *USA Today*, revealed 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.

Now, if that truly is the case, then maybe in some way there's a message, in that truth, that the church today can learn from? So, let's milk the study for all it's worth. Trust me, this is "moos" we can use.

Researcher Catherine Douglas, a Doctor of Animal Welfare and Behavior at Newcastle University, says farmers have always believed that naming cows has a positive effect. But until recently, there has never been any scientific evidence. That is until a study she conducted revealed that if a cow isn't given individual attention, then it's likely to be uncomfortable around humans and become stressed. Her research uncovered that a stressed cow releases a hormone called cortisol, which inhibits milk production.

But cow-friendly farmers name their cows and make contact with them from an early age. "They chat to them in passing," Douglas observed. "They walk among the cows and speak with them." Which may remind us of the familiar words sung in the old hymn "In the Garden." And I'm certain most of us know them practically by heart: *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.*

Jon Bansen, the owner and operator of an organic dairy farm in Oregon, knows each of his 165 cows by a personal name — his favorites being Cinder,

Ajax and Hawk. His grandfather started adhering to the practice, making the rule that you couldn't be head milker until you could identify every cow by name. "A cow that's happy and calm is going to produce more milk," says Bansen.

That makes sense, doesn't it? And God knows that the same thing applies to us as well. Although truth be told, in Scripture, perhaps the most frequent metaphor for God's children is sheep. But a metaphor is a metaphor. And that being the case, today, we're going to talk about cows. So, let's try our best to open our minds and wrap our heads around a new idea.

Just for today, let us imagine that Jesus, our Savior and Shepherd, is a cow-friendly Christ. And, like it or not, we are the cows. Can you say "moo?" Say it with me, "moo," not "boo," Moo!.

In today's second lesson, a letter to the Hebrews declares 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." 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. And 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."

This morning's reading teaches us that God "spoke" to us by way of his Son, but his Son also spoke to us about God. Jesus often taught about the nature and character of God through his teachings and parables. In the Sermon on the Mount for example, Jesus reveals the heart of God by teaching about love, forgiveness, mercy and righteousness.

Then, there are the miracles of Christ that demonstrated the power and compassion of God. Through healing the sick, raising the dead, and performing other miraculous signs, Jesus shows us that God loves us, cares about us, and is concerned about our well-being. That is who God is.

In fact, in Jesus' interactions with people, he showed himself as the "imprint of God's very being." During his earthly ministry Jesus demonstrated that he embodies the character and essence of God, making God known to humanity through his life, words and actions and revealing divine truths about God's nature and will. Jesus is the definitive revelation of God to humanity, showing us God's love, mercy, compassion and desire for reconciliation.

When reading any of the four Gospels, it is quite apparent that Christ loved to use images from rural life when he was teaching the public about the nature of God's kingdom. Take a moment and try and picture a 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.

You've no doubt heard countless sermons about sheep, and how we Christians so often behave like sheep. But consider today's new metaphor for a moment: 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. And yet, we don't often take the time to paint this type of picture of Jesus. More often, we think of him as our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Never the Dairy Farmer though.

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.” This is the Christ who “for a little while was made lower than the angels,” says our second lesson for today, and who walked among us, making us happy and calm. This is all for our benefit, says the author of the letter, “For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.”

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.” Which begs the inevitable question: Are we giving it to him, are we producing fruit?

Now, it would be wrong to push this image too far and begin thinking of ourselves as actual cows, lining up to be milked. That wouldn’t be a very pretty picture. Besides, our output isn’t supposed to be dairy products; instead, says Hebrews, it is to include mutual love, hospitality to strangers, concern for prisoners, faithful marriage and a life “free from the love of money.”

For the purpose of this morning’s message, let’s move away from the concept of Jesus as the one who is the very expression of God and who came to be God enfleshed among us, to a second takeaway idea. Namely, 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 out about our salvation. We’re not going to give good milk if we feel guilty about not volunteering enough. We’re not going to do good work if we are uncomfortable about our theological knowledge. We’re not going to be very productive if we feel badly about not being green enough ... or holy enough ... or prophetic enough ... or spiritual enough.

Hopefully you get the point. It's better to be blessed than stressed. And Jesus came to bless us, not stress us. Or, as the Apostle John so gracefully put 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." In other words, 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 his brothers and sisters, and to *walk with us, talk with us, and tell us we are his own*. But this leaves us with a challenge....to grow in our relationship with Jesus by really working at it, day after day after day.

Yes, 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 and become more productive. Like any good friendship, marriage or long-term relationship, we have to give it priority in our lives and really work at it, if it's going to be healthy, life-giving and fruitful. Sociologist Tony Campolo observes that when the saints of the church become deeply spiritual, they feel "a driving need to respond to the needs of others." So, growing closer to Jesus can actually make us more productive as Christians.

This morning let us remember that we have been placed under the care of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd, who, according to the writer of Hebrews, in these "last days" is the expression of God. And, like all good cows, let's not forget that our job is to produce. mutual love, hospitality to strangers, concern for prisoners and the needs of others, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.