

To Know You Is to Love You

Isaiah 49: 1; 62: 2; I Corinthians 8:1-3; Revelation 2: 17

Do angels live among us unseen and unnoticed? Are there, in our midst, spirits of a higher kind that share our daily existence of flesh and blood, yet belong to a more ineffable dimension? Fans of *Peanuts*, that Charles Schultz cartoon, know that Snoopy the dog lives on a higher plane than the rest. Yes, Snoopy the dog! Yet most of us, whether fans of them or not, know that, in reality, it is the cats that live among us, yet answer to another dimension of reality. Poet T. S. Elliot knew.

The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,
It isn't just one of your holiday games;
You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter
When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.
First of all, there's the name that the family use daily,
Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James....,
[lists other common pet names]
But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular,
A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,
Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,
Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?
[lists names that never belong to more than one cat.]
But above and beyond there's still one name left over,
And that is the name that you never will guess;
The name that no human research can discover -
But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.
When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable
Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

(T. S. Elliot, *The Naming of Cats*)

What is in a name? Sometimes it's everything. In many native cultures, children are not given a name, but at the appropriate time, they choose a name that fits them – a name that expresses their nature as they understand themselves. In our own culture, parents often choose a name that matches the dreams they have for their child's life. As we grow, many of us choose the form of our name to use, or a nickname, or in some cases a whole new name to match the image of who we are. Life is a journey of discovering, and perhaps of remembering, who we are and who we are in relationship with God..

There are many biblical references about the importance of this naming process. In Isaiah 49:1 (NRSV), the prophet in exile claims his naming as a vindication of his calling as a prophet: "Yahweh called me before I was born, from my mother's womb pronounced my name." In Isaiah 62:2, the prophet seems to be preparing the people to

live after a time of exile. He offers their naming as a sign of hope: “You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.”

A rather curious text 1 Corinthians 8: 1-3 refers to the whole issue of eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. For most of us, this is not much of an issue today! For many Christians in Corinth, it was huge! An animal sacrificed by the local lord to the Roman – and sometimes other – gods was then often barbecued and offered as the central dish in a big feast for the lord’s peasants – a group that included many Christians. For a lot of them, this was the only meat they ever got. The Corinthians had written Paul for advice on what to do. The key line here is verse three: “Anyone who loves God is known by [God].” Paul showed love through his sensitivity to the plight of the peasants. He told them essentially that it was not the meat, but the attitude that mattered most.

The final text comes from the last book in the New Testament: Revelation 2: 17. The author wrote letters to the early churches suffering in persecution. To those who conquer, who overcome the great tribulation: “I will give a white stone [on which is] written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.” This new name comes from God.

The gift God has for us is to know ourselves, to get to know that person God created, that person we are becoming. The old spiritual goes, “I’ve got a new name and it’s over in Zion.” It is God’s Name for You. Author Thomas Merton wrote about the difference between the way most of us know ourselves and the new naming that is God’s gift.

The ‘I’ that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true ‘I’ that has been united to God in Christ. It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown ‘self’ whom most of us never discover until we are dead.

(Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*)

The story is told of Rabbi Yehuda who dreamt that he had died and was waiting at the gates of heaven, waiting for his name to be called to enter. Thousands were called, but Yehuda didn’t hear his name. He was distressed. The angel replied, “I have called your name, but [you are like] many who come here [and] have never heard their true names on the lips of man or angel. They have lived believing that they know their names. They don’t know that it is for them that the gates of the kingdom are open. ...Perhaps in their lifetime someone has once called them by their right name. Here they shall stay until they have remembered. Perhaps no one has ever called them by their right name. They shall [wait] till they are silent enough to hear the King of the Universe himself call them.” Rabbi Yehuda woke up and prayed in tears, “Grant me once before I die to hear my own true name on the lips of my brothers.” (as told by Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment*)

Have you ever even once heard your true name? Is there “something you have done, [even] some quite small thing, that in some way crystallizes for you your sense of who you are?” (Dewar, *Invitations*, 86). I believe one of the most important tasks of our lives is to learn who we are – our essential identity; to discover our name.

Why is this important? Like Rabbi Yehuda, we need to know who we are so we can respond to God's call to us. Why else? It is in response to that call, that we discover the work that best corresponds to us and our gifts. Why else? It is through discovering that call that we can do the work that helps fulfill us and, in cooperation with the divine nature, help move this world toward shalom – what the Bible calls *the kingdom of God*.

With all that, there is another reason to learn our name and discover our essential identity. It is so that we will be able to recognize God when God calls. It is so that we can find for ourselves the name for God that reflects the divine nature for us.

How do we know God? The answer is simply -- in relationship. Beginning the journey of faith, our knowledge of God tends to come in relationship with other people of faith: parents, children, friends, and church family. We usually accept the tenets of religious faith through relationship and trust. In that case, we come to see God through the filter of religion. Or else, perhaps we come to see God through the lens of our own life experiences: a desire to please, a fear of abandonment, addictions, or a response to addictions. But as we grow faith, we learn, discover, and decide what we value most and learn more clearly who we are. That way leads us to learn who God is for us.

Thomas Merton again described the journey of discovering one's essential identity, a new name, as:

a route downward through loneliness and acute boredom to the place where a man or a woman, deprived of diversion and the constant affirmation of others, begins to doubt his or her identity. When [you] reach the point in which all illusion is stripped away [and you] know [your] own weakness, failure, and despair to the full, then the way is made clear, [and the possibility available for discovering a] new identity in God himself.

(“The Cell,” *Contemplation in a World of Action* cited by Monica Furlong, *Merton, A Biography*)

This teaching is part of a series titled, *Coping with Crisis: Taking Charge of Your Life*. Answers for how to cope are not really found on the journey. The journey itself is the answer because it's on the journey that we clarify our deepest questions. The journey is the answer because it's on the journey we discover our own wisdom. The answer comes in learning to hear your own “ineffable, effable, effanineffable, deep and inscrutable singular name.” It is the answer in that it opens the door to relationship with the divine – with God.

One last thing -- God waits to hear your essential name for God on your lips and in your heart. This is a name that allows you to be so very present to the reality that is behind, above, around, and within all of life. Like discovering your name for yourself, learning your name for God is a symbol of the partnership, the intimate connectedness, that is fundamental to the meaning of our existence.

This idea of partnership can be hard to grasp, especially with the images we have of God as dominant. We keep expecting God to take care of everything. Yet God seems to be passionate about what I think and value and do. I cannot be fully me without the divine relationship. Somehow, God will not be fully God without intimate human relationships

-- without partnership, without you and me. That is why we are here. That is why we are church – to be learning and practicing the partnership with the God we experience and the God we meet in each other. The invitation I extend to you today is to listen for your true name on the lips of your family, colleagues, children, and parents. Learn to be quiet and hear your name called by the Spirit of the Universe. Make it a priority to discover your essential identity and know - choose to believe -- that you are known, absolutely and completely known, and loved by the one who made you and in whose life you live. Trust that in partnership with God, our lives find their meaning.