

I have called you by name

Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:21-22

January 13, 2013

It would be a stretch to call John Faulkner a friend. We've never spent any time together or even had an extended sit-down conversation, but, even so, I have a great deal of respect for John Faulkner and do consider him a friend.

John works as a clerk at the Rite Aid pharmacy in Blue Hill, Maine. At least I think he's a clerk. When I shop there, I'll sometimes see him behind the cash register. He may be the store manager or even the owner of the franchise, for all I know.

I usually see John at church, at St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church in Blue Hill. That's my mother's church and John's church and the church Lynne and I attend when we are in Maine.

Episcopal practice is to celebrate eucharist, communion, the Lord's Supper, every Sunday. It is considered an essential part of every worship service. Every Sunday the service follows the same pattern. The order and words used for eucharist are prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer, and the celebrant, the priest, the minister, simply recites verbatim what is written there -- the same words, the same gestures, Sunday after Sunday.

The liturgy is full of meaning and power, the retelling of the story is full and complete, but I would find it hard myself to do ministry in that context. The tradition is comforting and faithful and rich, but is important for me, too, to be able to speak and to hear something fresh, something personal, something in the moment, something from the heart. But we are blessed each summer as we share in this different tradition and as we appreciate the grandeur and dignity and beauty of Episcopal way.

After all is prepared and said, we are invited to come forward to receive the elements . In groups, we walk to the front of the sanctuary, kneel at the altar rail, and one-by-one receive bread from the priest and then are offered wine from a common cup by one of the chalice bearers who follow after her.

John Faulkner is a lay leader at St. Francis and often serves as chalice bearer, holding the Bible for the priest as the gospel is read, and assisting her in serving the eucharist. That's how I first met John, when he bent down in front of me, offered me the cup of wine, and said, "Tim, the blood of Christ, given for you"

Actually, I don't remember exactly what he said, but I do remember he said, "Tim." As he offered me the cup, he looked me in the eye and called me by my name. It was as if this precious gift was being offered personally to me!

But, of course, it was! There is no "as if." The precious gift of Christ's body and blood are offered, personally, by name, to me, and to you, to each one of us, each time, every time, we eat and drink in memory of him.

That's why we do communion the way we do now, because of my experience receiving the eucharist at St. Francis, and because of John.

We now invite you to come forward. We invite you to respond, with your whole body, to Jesus' invitation, to stand up, to take action, to move, to come, to him. And you do come, one by one, but also all together, a sign to each other and to the world, of your eagerness to take what Jesus offers, and to join your brothers and sisters in following him. As you come, you are a visible sign of a people on the move.

And when I offer you the bread and the cup, I speak your name, because of John. I speak your name because of how much it meant to me when John spoke my name, because I want you to know these precious gifts are offered to you personally.

But it's not John or me who offers them, and that's the point. I do speak your name because I want you to know that I know you, that I acknowledge you, that I value you, but my ability to know you and to give value to you and to affirm you is limited. And it's not me you're interested in! It's Jesus! You want to know that Jesus knows you and values you and affirms you.

It is my privilege and it is John's privilege, to act as Christ's agents, as Christ's servants, inviting you to his table, and speaking your name on his behalf. It is Jesus who calls you by name.

I have called you by name ... you are mine.

That's what the Lord said to his people Israel. And they sure needed to hear it! They were living in exile in Babylon, involuntary refugees, displaced people, people without home or homeland. They felt forgotten, forsaken, abandoned. They had lost their land, their identity, their name, and, it seemed, their God too.

But Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord to them ...

*I have called you by name -- you are mine.
When you pass through deep waters,
I will be with you;
your troubles will not overwhelm you.
When you pass through fire,
you will; not be burned;
the hard trials that come will not hurt you.*

You will pass through deep waters. You will have to pass through fire. You will have to endure troubles and trials, but they will not overwhelm you, they will not hurt you, they will not break you, because the Lord is with you, because the Lord has not forgotten you. The Lord has not forgotten you, but calls you by name, because you are precious to the Lord, because the Lord loves you and honors you.

And the Lord who calls you by name, will save you. Israel, the Lord will save you and bring your scattered people home! Why? "To bring me glory," says the Lord -- to bring God glory.

To bring God glory? God will save his people so they can draw attention and give praise and bring glory to God? Yes! But think about what this means. What brings glory to God? The beauty and the goodness and the grandeur of what he has made.

We bring glory to God by what we are and by what we do. The glory of God is the beauty of human persons, the beauty of human community, the beauty of justice and compassion, the beauty of love. When we care for each other, when we serve each other, when we put others needs before our own, when we tend each other's hurts, when we forgive each other, when we make peace with each other, when we make peace among nations, it is a beautiful thing! It is beautiful! It is glorious! God is glorified!

That was Israel's purpose -- to bring God glory. That's why God made them. That's why God chose them. That's why God saved them.

The people of Israel were and are a chosen people, a people precious to God. But can you see that it is a chosenness of purpose, not of status? The Lord told Abraham: "I will bless you and make your name famous ... and through you I will bless all the nations." Israel was chosen for a purpose, for a task, and that task is to bring God glory and be the means of bringing God's blessing to all the nations.

They were chosen to reflect, by their faithfulness to the covenant, by the ways they treated each other, by the ways they treated the weak and helpless and poor and sick among them, by the ways they treated strangers among them, the goodness of the God who made them. God called them to shine with the glory of God and to cause all who watched them to be eager to come to know and honor this same God too.

So, if God chose Israel, does that mean God loves Israel more than the other nations? The text seems to say that ...

*I am the Lord your God,
the Holy God of Israel, who saves you.
I will give up Egypt to set you free;
I will give up Ethiopia and Seba,
I will give up whole nations to save your life ...*

It seems to say that, and yet, the Lord calls these other nations by name too! God will save his chosen people, because he loves them, because they are precious to him, but he saves them and restores them so they may fulfill their purpose, which is to bring God's blessing to all the nations!

It's important that we hear this clearly, too. We need to hear this clearly because we like to think of ourselves as chosen people. And we are. We are chosen with Christ, in Christ.

But, as it was with Israel, being chosen is a matter of purpose, not of status. Being chosen doesn't mean we are more valuable to God than anybody else. It means that God has given us a job, to bring God glory by who we are and what we do, and to help bring God's blessing to all the world. Being chosen doesn't make us the masters of everybody else. It makes us the servants of everybody else.

Isn't that what Jesus said? "I have come not to be served, but to serve." If any one is chosen, if any one is precious to God, it is Jesus. "You are my own dear Son, I am pleased with you."

But when did Jesus hear these words from heaven? He heard them when he was baptized, at the beginning, before his ministry began. He is precious to God, not because of what he has accomplished, but because he is chosen, chosen to do the will and work of his Father, chosen to walk the path of obedience all the way, chosen to give his life for the sake of the world, chosen to bring God glory, chosen to bring blessing to all humanity.

I have called you by name ... you are mine.

The Lord said it to Israel, the Lord said it to Jesus, and the Lord says it to you. You belong to God. You are precious to God. The Lord has called you by name. The Lord has chosen you. The Lord has chosen you to bring God glory, and to bless the nations.

By what name has the Lord called you? This is the wonder and mystery revealed in the gospel and made real every time we eat and drink at Christ's table. When we are in Christ, when we are joined to Christ, we are called by his name! The Lord said to Jesus: "You are my own dear Son," and when we join ourselves to Jesus, that is what the Lord says to us ...

Tim, you are my own dear son ...

Greg, you are my own dear son ...

Miah, you are my own dear daughter ...

Nicole, you are my own dear daughter ...

Al, you are my own dear son ...

Jeni, you are my own dear daughter ...

Wow!