

What is your name?

John 1:1-18

January 5, 2014

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Two months ago, Dave Panicucci asked that question to the dozen or so children sitting on these steps at the front of the church. He wanted them to know that they matter to us, that they matter to us enough to want to call them each by name. And he wanted us to know that it matters that we know their names and can call them each by name.

So it's not just that short, stocky kid with the impish grin, but it's Sam.

So it's not just that tall and quiet girl who gives good answers, but it's Zoe.

So it's not just that earnest young man who was baptized several months ago, but it's Da'Qualys.

When I call you by name, it means you are somebody to me. Knowing your name makes you part of my world. It makes some kind of connection between us, some kind of attachment between us. Knowing your name is not yet a relationship, but it is the prelude to a relationship. You are Greg, Russ, Margaret, Nancy, not just some anonymous, generic, amorphous person that has happened to cross my path.

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Moses asked that question to the voice that spoke to him out of the burning bush.

When I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors sent me to you," they will ask me, "What is his name?" So what can I tell them?

What is your name? Because "God of your ancestors" isn't a name. "God" is anonymous, generic, amorphous, vague, ambiguous. We can imagine or suppose or believe all kinds of different things about a god who is out there somewhere. But if God has a name, a particular name, and if I know it, if I can call God by name, then God is somebody to me. Knowing God's name is not yet a relationship, but it is the prelude to a relationship. Knowing God's name makes God real and alive to me. It makes some kind of connection between us, some kind of attachment between us.

Then what is God's name? The prologue to the gospel of John, the scripture lesson we read this morning, reveals two names by which God is known.

The first is ὁ λόγος ... the Word. Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος ... in the beginning, the Word already existed. The Word was already there in the beginning, before the beginning, before the beginning of everything, which means the Word was there with God, which means the Word was God. But if the Word was God, then God was the Word, and the Word, ὁ λόγος, is one of God's names.

The Word! Not power, but word. Not mystery or ineffability or omnipotence or omniscience or omnipresence or any other name we might think to attribute to a supreme being, but word. God is word. God is speech, language, communication.

Language is a uniquely human capacity. All living things eat, grow, reproduce, and eventually die, and some living things -- bees, apes, whales, birds -- communicate among themselves in some fashion.

But only human beings have language, the ability to make an infinite variety of new words and new concepts out of otherwise meaningless sounds and symbols, the ability to communicate with each other about things not only present but also existing only in the past or the future or the imagination, the ability to express, to put into words, a complex layer of beliefs and wants and desires and hopes and fears and sorrows and joys, the ability to attach meaning to events and people and ourselves.

Language allows us to get outside ourselves, not just to be, but to think about being. Language allows us to see ourselves in relation to other things and other people, not just to be, but to be with. Language attaches meaning to the events and perceptions and experiences and relationships that make up our lives, not just to be, but to be for something, to be for someone.

Language is a uniquely human capacity, our capacity to not merely be, but to be aware of our being, to be intentional about our being, to make and remake ourselves in the service of an idea or passion or person.

Language is a uniquely human capacity ... or shouldn't we say, if God is word and the word is God, that language is a divine capacity and that language is the image of God in us? God speaks the worlds into being. God speaks us into being and names us, and puts in us the same capacity to speak and to name.

God is word, God is speech, God is language, which means that God is the source of meaning. God is the source of emotion and awareness and intentionality and relationship and attachment. We are how we are because

God is who God is. God is not aloof, but engaged -- speaking, wanting, calling, caring, being with, loving, because love, though proved by its actions, comes into being by its words.

The Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became a human being and lived among us.

The Word became a human being and lived among us! The Word that was God became a human being and lived among us! No one has ever seen God. We can't know God by seeing or touching or smelling, but the only Son, who is the same as God, the word made flesh, Jesus Christ, he has made him known.

This is God's name, too. Jesus is God's name. Jesus makes God particular. Jesus makes God somebody. Jesus makes God real and alive to us. Jesus makes a connection between God and us. Jesus forges an attachment between God and us. Once we know God's name, once we have encountered Jesus, we can no longer make God into whatever we imagine or suppose or believe him to be. Just look at Jesus -- this is who God is!

Is God a fierce and demanding and unbending judge? Look at Jesus!

Does God call us to avenge wrongs and to vanquish our enemies and purge the world of evil and evildoers? Look at Jesus!

Does God laugh? Does God cry? Does God grieve? Does God make merry? Look at Jesus!

Does God care about me? Does God care about my one solitary, insignificant, inconsequential life? Look at Jesus!

The word that was God became a human being and lived among us, full of grace and truth. This is who God is. We know who God is. We can call God by name.

And God calls us by name. One by one by one, God, the word made flesh, Jesus Christ, calls us by name and says, "Follow me."

One by one by one, God, the word made flesh, Jesus Christ, calls us by name and invites us to share life with him, to be where he is, to be with him, to be in him.

One by one by one, God, the word made flesh, Jesus Christ, calls us by name and invites us to meet him here, at the table, at his table.

I have told you before about John Faulkner, a pharmacy clerk and a deacon at St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church in Blue Hill, Maine. I have told you what it meant to me to kneel at the communion rail, to be offered the communion wine, and to hear John say, "Tim, the cup of salvation offered to you." To me! It's for me! This is not just some generic religious ritual. It's for me. He called me by name.

And I have told you that's why I try to do the same, when I can, to call you by name when I offer you the bread and the cup, to make it personal. Because you matter. You matter to me and you matter to us, the people of the First Congregational church family.

But more importantly, I act here as a steward of Christ's table. I act here as the servant of Jesus Christ, calling you by name to remind you that you matter to him. You matter to him this much: "This is my body, broken for you ... This is my blood, poured out for you ..."