

The Trinity and Us: Naming

Exodus 3: 7-15
Philippians 2: 5-11
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I. Introduction

We're all familiar with that wonderful scene in *Romeo and Juliet* when Romeo climbs over the wall of the Capulets and sees Juliet on the balcony pining for him and ruing the fact that he's got the name of Montague which is the name of her family's great foe. And she queries the night, "What's in a name? That which we call rose by any other word would smell as sweet," to sort of tamp down the significance of the name. But she, of course, does so in vain knowing full well the significance of naming.

Names are important. We know this every time we forget a name or someone forgets our name. Names capture what it means to be in relationship. And today we're going to explore the names of the Trinity as we continue our series on the Trinity.

When I mention to folks that we're doing a sermon series on the Trinity I have been getting a lot of quizzical looks from people who want to say to me, "Really? You're trying to build up a church and you're trying to attract in new people and you thought it would be a really good idea to preach on a profoundly old, deeply esoteric theological doctrine?"

They also sometimes do ask, "Isn't this exactly the kind of conversation around dogma that all of the research says drives people away from our church?" And I acknowledge that we have to handle it carefully and in a way that I hope is invitational,

but it is also my belief that how we understand who God is, is profoundly important in terms of how we go about encountering God and encountering one another.

The Franciscan priest and theologian Leonardo Boff in his wonderful book on the Trinity says that at the root of all great human problems there always lies a theological issue. So that as we gain clarity on who we are as a people of God, as people who claim God's name, we can get clarity on how we encounter God and how we relate to one another, how we live out being a church.

This has some specific significance for us in our Metropolitan community also as we continue our process of living into what it means to be a church at three different sites. And we'll tease out this whole tension of unity and differentiation over the next couple of weeks and how we live into that as a people.

II. The Name of the Trinity, and how the name of the Trinity is at the heart of who we are as people of God.

So we're going to look at names and in particular how we go about naming the Trinity. Names, of course, are tricky things. On the one hand, they seem simple to point to the thing to which we refer, it's a label and yet in some way that label captures and carries the significance of the thing at which to which it points. And we all know this instinctively, right? Because while we can trivialize names, think about how parents' angst about naming a child and what is the significance of that name as the child will grow. If we're naming a church, naming a business those decisions are fraught with weight because of the weight that names carry for us.

In the ancient world, of course, all magic was related to the naming of things and there was a very deep understanding that if we knew the name of something we can start to control it. This is part of what's happening in this wonderful story from *Exodus*. God has called Moses to go to Egypt to rescue the Israelites and Moses is a little resistant. So he's coming out with all kinds of reasons that he is not the right person, this is not the right time and one of his tools is to say to God, "Well, if I'm going to go, tell me at least who is sending me. Give me a name."

Now, part of this is the avoidance, where part of it also is Moses' realization that if he's got a name, he's got a handle on the one who's got his name. He's got a way of controlling God and the relationship with God. And God, very wonderfully, both gives him a name and doesn't give him a name. God's response is, "I am who I am," it's an archaic Hebrew form of the verb "to be" which gets translated in different ways and in different bibles. "I am who I am," is the most common, it's also sometimes translated as, "I will be who I will be," or "I will create what I will create," but in all of those there is a sense of movement that God's name is a verb because God is always in motion. And it's a name that invites Moses into a dialogue with God and invites us into a dialogue because it's both revelatory and profound mystery.

We use mystery often when we talk about it in a church context to refer to something that we can't ever know. In a more secular context, mystery is often used to refer to a puzzle, something that we can figure out. And neither of those is true for what God invites us into in a mystery. Mystery in religious context is something that we can ultimately never know but that we are called to enter into and participate in, to explore and to seek to understand to the degree we can in the moment that we can,

realizing that we can never attain the ultimate understanding and that our own understanding will evolve as we grow and change.

That name of God is in Hebrew, “YHWH” and became so sacred in Jewish tradition that it’s never spoken out loud. It is the most common word for God in the scriptures; it’s used over 6,000 times, although if you open your bibles now you will never see it because in deference to that tradition of the sacredness of the name, wherever the word YHWH or the name Yahweh occurs, all of our Bibles print out in small capital letters “Lord.” So when you see that small capital “Lord” in your scriptural text, the Hebrew word there is always YHWH. If any of you join friends or spouses for Yom Kippur this weekend, you will never hear Yahweh read from the sacred text because as the reader is reading he or she will substitute the Hebrew word Ha Shem which means “the Name,” “the Name” said, “the Name did,” because “the Name” is so powerful and so sacred.

Calling upon “the Name” is to invoke and invite the power of God’s presence. And we see this, of course, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and into the New Testament where Jesus identifies with “the Name” over and over again in the gospels.

Jesus’ name is itself a reference to YHWH. Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew word or Hebrew name “Joshua” and the “Yah” at the end of Joshua is the “Yah” of YHWH. So, “Joshua” means “YHWH saves,” “YHWH is the one who saves.” Jesus’ very name incorporates some of the divine name and Jesus very intentionally throughout the gospels echoes this wonderful passage from Exodus when he says, “I am the good shepherd. I am the true vine. I am the living water.” All of those “I am”

echo this passage from Exodus. And then in that wonderful passage where he says, "Before Abraham was, I am," claiming that identification with the God of the burning bush.

In this hymn that Paul quotes us in Philippians, we, again, have reference to the divine name as it gets gifted to Jesus so that Paul talks about the fact that as Jesus empties himself, that God gives him the name that is above every name and then the spirit helps us to understand and celebrate the giving of that name and the sacred unity that that implies among the three persons of the Godhead.

We use a lot of different names to try to capture that relationship. The most traditional, of course, is the word that Jesus uses at the end of Matthew when he says that we're to go and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. And there's some great power to those names because all of us understand the way parents and children shape one another and form one another and help each other become who they are.

So, when we understand God as Father and Son, we understand how a father and a son reflect one another and permeate each other and shape one another in this relationship of love. So that it's a very compelling image of what the Godhead is like.

Its significant downside is that it is so exclusively male in its imagery and has at points made God seem like a male. That's its theological downside. But it's got great power in terms of communicating what the Godhead is like and the movement of the persons and the binding together that makes them into God. So that the message there is that the Father is not God and the Son is not God and the Spirit is not God, it's

the way that those three relate to one another and permeate each other and intertwine with one another. That is what the Godhead is about; there is a sense of movement and relationship that is at the heart of who God is.

Kendall Soulen, who teaches at Wesley Theological Seminary, just came out with a wonderful book on the Trinity that also invites us to enrich our understanding of the Trinity by exploring different names for who God is and argues essentially that our understanding of God is enriched and deepened as we explore the variety of names that capture who the Trinity is and what the Trinity is about.

St. Augustine referred to the Trinity as the lover and the beloved and love that binds them together. The theologian Tertullian referred to the Trinity as the root and the tree and the fruit. Karl Barth referred to the Trinity as the revealer, the revelation and revealed-ness.

So, what all of these great theologians and all of this wonderful imagery is trying to tell us is that the Trinity is not simply how we have seen God and it is not simply a reflection of how God has acted amongst us, but it is a picture of who God is in God's very essence. That what the Trinity tells us is that God in God's essence is a verb. God is motion. God is relationship. God in God's essence is the movement in love between the persons of the Trinity. And if we then are created in God's image, what that means for us is that we are also created for relationship. We are, in our very being, created to be in relationship with God and with one another, in a relationship that is moving and changing and inviting us into a process of never ending growth.

We spent some time right after Easter exploring the whole idea of spiritual but not religious. And at the heart of a lot of those pieces of conversation is this very deep sense that a journey of faith, a life journey is not one that we engage in solo, that our call is to come together as a community and work through the rough edges of what being in a relationship with one another is about because that's how God is. God in God's self is in relationship and is relationship so that whenever we cut ourselves off from our relationship with God, from our relationships with each other we step away or we fall away from who we have been created to be.

III. The Power of Naming

Now, as regards to naming, there are a couple of very simple ways in which that gets lived out. I want to invite you today as we leave the service -- as we move outside to celebrate in our picnic -- to find somebody whose name you don't know and introduce yourself. It maybe a face that you've seen for years and that we're required a certain degree of overcoming our native embarrassment to say, "You know, I know I've seen you before but I don't remember your name, my name's Charlie." And as we share our names with one another we invite each other into a relationship, we reveal a little bit of ourselves to the other and we share with them a little bit of who we are.

This is a totally trivial point but I'm going to say it anyway because that's the way my mind works: nametags. I want to suggest that a nametag is a theological statement. It is not simply a nicety; it is a way of inviting somebody that we don't know into a relationship with us. What does my nametag say to you? It says, "Here's who I am, who are you?" and how do we engage one another in a way that gives life.

So, if you're a longtime Metropolitan member, bring your nametag to church. If you are new, I'll get you a nametag. All you have to do is ask, call up the office and I'll order one for you. Because nametags are a way that we invite people into a relationship with us.

I also want to suggest that as we live into this three-site church that names are very important and that we need to understand their sacredness, so that when we joined into this relationship, our Church Council made the decision that we were going to change how we referred to our self. We've been Metropolitan Memorial for generations but now as a three-site church we're calling our self Metropolitan Church and this the Metropolitan Memorial site and there's a Wesley site and a St. Luke's site. But I want to suggest to those of us who are here at the Metropolitan Memorial site that whenever we refer to our church as Metropolitan Memorial, because that's just the way we've always done it, amen? We have, on some level, disowned the two other churches that are now part of our family.

So, I want to invite us to bring some intentionality to how we're using language and how we're naming ourselves because those words carry great power and have great weight. So, when you go outside today you're going to encounter brothers and sisters who are over at Wesley and who are down at Crossroads and we're all part of one family now. And the way we have named our family is the Metropolitan Church. I want us to start to live into that language because names and the way we use them shape how we engage one another.

It would be easy to think of Metropolitan Memorial as the big church that is absorbing the other churches. That's not who we are. Who we are is a new community that has been formed by the joining of three churches and I want our naming to reflect that.

IV. Conclusion

In that wonderful scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet struggles mightily to dismiss the power of names and it is, of course, part of the irony of the story that the names that she seeks to dismiss are ultimately what caused her and Romeo's death because we can't underestimate the power of names and how we use them.

So, as we as a people of God claim the name of the Trinity, that says something about who we are, what kind of community we are, what kind of God we worship.

Martin Luther is reputed to have said, "To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation. To try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity." There is a piece of who the Trinity is and what the Trinity is about that is ultimately other, enshrouded in deep and sacred mystery. But it is not a mystery that we can simply write-off as something I will never understand, it's a mystery that invites us to explore, that invites us to engage, that invites us to seek and to understand what we can understand of God. It's a mystery that invites us in to a dance that gives us life. Amen.