

June 7, 2009
 Holy Trinity Sunday
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On the day our first child was born, we arrived at the birthing center with a well-thought-out list of names for girls, but with very few names appropriate for the child who greeted us two weeks ahead of his due date. So Beth and I, for a few hours, held in our arms, listened to, kissed, smelled, and looked into the face of this person who had no name, who had never had any name. And it was kind of cool, this child hovering above the world of names, in a sort of suspended animation. But it was also kinda weird. Parts of our relationship were held in suspension until he had a name.

Naming is rarely simple in Scripture. When the Israelites were in the wilderness wandering and hungry and woke up to find this strange, flaky, sweet, bread-like stuff scattered around them and somebody asked “What is it?” the name they settled on for this stuff that kept them from starving in the desert was “Manna,” which in English translates as “What is it?”

So, “what is it?”

“Obviously, it’s what-is-it.” Got that? It’s like an Abbott and Costello skit.

The Israelites made into a creed the truth that God saved them in the wilderness with manna from heaven. But as to what exactly that food was... The name is kind of a shrug. “It’s... manna.” What-is-it?

Maybe the Israelites gave manna this name-that-is-not-a-name as a reminder that they had like zero control over this life-bread, and that the bread was pure gift from God.

From ancient times, the Israelites were cautious about this whole naming business. Even today many pious Jews will not speak the name of God out of a sense that naming something can often lead to the illusion that you completely understand it, or even own it. All through the Hebrew scripture when you’re reading along in the Hebrew and you come upon the name of God, so people don’t accidentally say it aloud, the vowels in the name of God are all mixed up so it becomes a gibberish word. In fact, the word “Jehovah” is that very gibberish word. It’s like a “body double” for God in the Bible, a first line of defense from those who would use the name of God in vain.

At the same time, “name” in the Ancient Near East was a powerful concept and connected to someone’s essence. Doing something in someone’s name meant doing something in their way of being. So to do something “in the name of” Zeus, didn’t mean to go, say, ride a bicycle or build a house and just say “Zeus.” But, if you wanted to, in the name of Zeus, woo people while cleverly disguising your identity or just chuck lightning bolts at them, that would make sense.

To do something “in the name of” someone meant to do it in their way of being, in their spirit. So while you could certainly help the terminally ill and abandoned die with dignity in her name, you could probably never run a health insurance scam in the name of Mother Theresa no matter how many times you repeated her name while you did it. To do something in the name of Mother Theresa means to do it in her spirit of humility, compassion, conferring dignity to the poor and vulnerable. To do something “in the name of” another means to do it in their spirit, in their way of being.

This is the context out of which the name of the Holy Trinity emerged in early Christianity. Before there was any real doctrine nailed down about it, people were already baptizing “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Not only was this act about welcoming people into God’s way of being in the world, but this name, too, was a lot like “manna” or “Jehovah.”

Right in the middle of Justin Martyr’s description of Christian baptism, written around the year 150, right when he is describing how the name of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is spoken over all who are baptized, he also writes: no one can utter the name of the ineffable God; and if any one dare to say that there is a name, they rave with a hopeless madness.

So as St. Justin invokes the name of the Trinity in baptism, he simultaneously understands this invocation to mean that if you think you've got the name of God nailed down and all settled, you're insane. The Trinitarian name in baptism may, in fact, first de-stabilize our sense of the solidity of names.

We might think of Jesus' entire ministry as destabilizing the names that had been so firmly stuck to people: sinner, cripple, unclean, poor or rich, sexual outcast, second-class, god-forsaken, dead.

In the Gospel text from John today, Jesus tries to destabilize the certainties of a religious expert, Nicodemus. Jesus says that to understand the great name-reversals of the Gospel, you must be born from above—it's as if you must let go of the names that the world has plastered on you and on everything else, and in that space, like a new-born, by water and the Spirit, receive the names with which God names us: a world not condemned but beloved by God, where we might know each other as children of God, precious in God's sight.

In the reading from Romans today, Paul calls us to listen deep within ourselves to a voice that knows a name deeper than we often know ourselves: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry 'Abba, Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God... and joint heirs with Christ."

Humans do not have a great track record when it comes to calling each other names. We can even wield the name of God as a weapon at times, of patriarchy and control. Even when Jesus came among us he was named a glutton, a drunkard, a blasphemer, and finally a criminal, and crucified, all—according to some—in the name of Caesar, or in the name of God. To the end, even on the cross, Jesus kept naming us, speaking forgiveness, and in the resurrection, returning to us, speaking peace to us, naming us friends.

We who have such trouble with our own names and the names of others are here [at the font] re-born of water and the spirit, baptized in the name of the holy trinity, into God's way of being in the world, learning to call things by their true names: we and all creation created good, bathed in mercy, flowing and pouring with the spirit of God. Many of us, when we come into this place, having received all kinds of names from the world and those around us, remember at the font, even with body language in the sign of the cross and water, the life-giving name by which God calls us in baptism. This is a name we remember sometimes against a lot of contradictory evidence.

The name of the Holy Trinity is less about how we precisely name God but about how God names us, blesses us, calls us by our true name.

We might think of this congregation, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, as a place in this busy city, in this heady neighborhood, where we can be reminded of that Trinitarian name in which we are baptized, that speaks of mercy and love deeper and wider than that Great Lake only a few blocks from here. We are plunged into that name in baptism. It is the most true name we will ever called.

In the name of God who creates the earth and names it "good," in the name of Jesus Christ, who binds up the broken-hearted, in the name of the Holy Spirit who bears witness within us, in the name of the Holy Trinity—in that way of being—we have been named child of God, dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, forgiven sinner, living body of Christ in this world.

That is our name.