

Name-Calling
John 17:6-19
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There's power in hearing your name spoken out loud, isn't there? It's one thing to be a number or "Hey you!" or "Excuse me, ma'am." It's another thing for someone to speak your name. Well, in most cases.

A few years ago, I walked into the Apple store in the mall and a young sales associate approached me very enthusiastically and said, "Kory! How are you doing?"

I had no idea who this guy was but I didn't want to seem rude, so I said with a tone of mock familiarity, "Hey there, you! Great to see you again. How are you?"

He said, "I'm fine." Then he paused and said, "Have we met before?"

I said, "Well, I don't think so."

And he said, "OK. Because you said 'Great to see you again' like we've met."

And I said, "Well, you're the one who called my name!"

And he said, "No I didn't!"

And I said, "You said, 'Kory'."

And he said, "No, that's MY name. When you walked in, I said, 'Hi, I'm Kory.'"

And I said, "Well, so am I!"

And then we just stared at each other a few seconds and burst out laughing. And then he gave me a free iPhone because we had the same name. Not really. There's power in hearing your name spoken, or in knowing and speaking someone else's name.

We know that Jesus had a long to-do list when he came to earth. Heal the sick. Touch the lepers. Preach the good news of God. And don't forget one of the most important ones, which I saw captured in a cartoon recently. Jesus and his disciples are in a bar and Jesus says, "Bartender, ten waters please!" then he winks at his disciples.

Yes, Jesus' agenda for coming to earth contained a lot of things, but I would argue that one of the most important ones is highlighted in our passage today. It's chapter 17 of John and we're in the Upper Room with Jesus and his friends the night before he is to be crucified. While the other three gospels move us expeditiously through this scene, giving us the institution of the Lord's Supper and the naming of Judas as the betrayer before hustling off to the Garden of Gethsemane, in John's gospel Jesus lingers here, as if he wants to savor every moment of this last meal, this last conversation with his faithful followers.

In the midst of this last night together, Jesus offers a prayer. Not a quick blessing for the meal or a perfunctory nod to God; this is a heartfelt, gut-wrenching prayer. Jesus knows this may be the last prayer he ever offers on behalf of his disciples, so he fills it with urgency and passion. All of chapter 17 is his prayer for his followers, which means Jesus is not only praying for those in the room with him, but he's praying for those in this room and watching in their rooms at home, as well. It's powerful and humbling to think that Jesus prayed for you and for me.

Jesus prays for our protection and for our unity and for us to remain faithful in the face of challenges. But first, he tells God he has completed a primary task God gave him to do. "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world." I love the Message, which says, "I spelled out your character in detail to the men and

women you gave me.” Because we know Jesus, we know God’s character. We may think God is some unknowable being, some mystery far beyond the reaches of human understanding, but what John tells us is that when we see Jesus, we see God. When we know Jesus, we know God. And we have the special ability to speak God’s name and all that goes with that.

In the Hebrew culture, to know someone’s name was to know more than simply what they were called. A person’s name represented their identity, their character. So Jacob’s name meant “the deceiver,” until it was changed to Israel, which meant “strives with God.” We are told by Isaiah that the Messiah will be called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” Many of our names have a deeper meaning to them. For example, “Kory” is Swahili for “lover of barbecue.” Knowing a person’s name meant knowing the person in an intimate, personal sense. So to know God’s name was to know more than what God was called; it was to know what God was like, God’s essence and character.

The problem with that was that the Jews believed that God’s name was so sacred – “hallowed be thy name” – that no one could know it. There are no vowels in Hebrew alphabet. God’s name was written as YHWH, pronounced in English as Yahweh. These four letters together were thought to be so sacred, that when the reader came to them, she would substitute a different word for Lord, like “Elohim” or “Adonai.” The holy name for God was so sacred that people were not even supposed to know it, much less speak it. That’s why Moses’ boldness is so shocking in Exodus 3 when he asks God for God’s name so that he can tell the Israelites who is saving them. Do you remember what God said? “Tell them ‘I AM’ sent you.” God is known to them as the great “I AM.”

Fast forward to Jesus’ life in John’s Gospel. One of the distinctive features of this gospel is a set of sayings from Jesus. “I am the bread of life.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the true vine.” You see what he’s doing here? Through these sayings and his teachings and ministry, he is revealing God’s name to us. We come to know what God is like by looking at Jesus, who is the bread of life and the good shepherd. In his time, you weren’t supposed to speak God’s name. But Jesus spoke it to us in such a way that now all of us can speak it. Jesus is saying: “I have told you God’s name; the sacred name can now be spoken because of what I have done. I have brought God so close to you that even the most ordinary of people can speak to him and take their name upon his lips.” Thanks to Jesus, we have the power to invoke God’s name in this world.

This transference of authority from Jesus to us is important, because Jesus knew he wasn’t going to be around much longer to lead his disciples. He says, “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world.” And his prayer for the disciples and for us is this: “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one.” Through Jesus’ prayer, we are made one based on our faith in Christ and given the name of God to speak out loud. We are brought together, this rag-tag collection of human beings, because of Christ’s invitation, even though the people he puts us alongside may well be, as C.S. Lewis puts it, “that very selection of neighbors we have been avoiding all week.”

Thanks to the prayer of Jesus, we not only have the power to invoke God’s name, but to speak it into the darkness and injustice and hatred we see around us. Instead of being quiet or hiding our faith, we are called to be bold in speaking the name we’ve been given. Of all people, Jesus knows that God’s ongoing mission is not accomplished by running away from the world, but by running into it. No one will hear us speak God’s

name if our back is turned and we're heading the other direction or we choose to stay silent out of fear or embarrassment. This world needs to hear God's name, needs to know God as we know God, and it is up to us to fulfill that mission, to carry on Jesus' work of glorifying God here in this world.

Jesus did more than glorify God by speaking his name; he did it by living out his call, by being obedient. By virtue of our faith, we are known to others as followers of God. Unless you sneak into church each Sunday wearing a disguise, people in your life probably know you go to church. Therefore, what we do has an impact on how we represent God in this world. If Jesus had gone around Israel cussing and spitting and randomly smiting people, that would have told us something about the God he believed in. So if Jesus actually went around healing and eating with sinners and welcoming outcasts and reaching out to the poor, what does that tell us about God?

By extension, what do OUR actions say about God? Through our habits, our spending, our treatment of others, are we glorifying God? Are we giving people a glimpse of the eternal life present in the here and now, God's kingdom here on earth? I know we can never do this perfectly. When we shine God's light in this world, it will probably look more like a dim flicker than the steady beam. After all, God's light in us is filtered through our own imperfection. But we are called to shine it nonetheless. Each time we live as God has called us to live, each time we speak God's name with our words and our actions, we are glorifying God. We are completing the work God has called us to do.

When something good happens to you, do you give God the glory? When a door opens where there was only a wall, do you give God thanks? When you come out the other side of the valley of the shadow of death, a bit more bruised and beaten but still standing, do you praise God's name? When you are able to give generously, do you acknowledge God's gifts? Who gets the credit for your blessings, you or God? And do you just think the answer, or do you proclaim it so that everyone will know exactly where your heart is? We have the power to speak God's name...why wouldn't we do so?

Jesus says, "Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Protect them in your name that you have given me." When we speak God's name, we are calling upon a power so much greater than ourselves to help us accomplish what God has set before us. This hurting world needs healing and compassion and peace and other things that come when God's name is spoken, not as a curse or as a rationale for hate, but as a blessing. That's what we are called to do, to speak God's name to others through the ways we bless them with food, with clothing, with hope. We have been given the power and the responsibility to speak the name above all names, the name that has the power to heal divisions and scatter grace in abundance. May we have the courage to do it. Thanks be to...God.