

March 6, 2005-Youth Sunday
Mr. Brian Shivers

“Known by Name”

As Denise got out of her car and approached the door, an overwhelming sense of dread rose from the pit of her stomach lodging in the form of a lump in the back of her throat. There were many places she could be on this night and she wasn't sure that this should be one of them. “Who is going to be on the other side of this door?” she caught herself wondering aloud into the cool spring evening air. The thought process continued silently in her mind, “Who will be there to greet me? Will I know anyone at all?”

As she stepped up onto the porch, she took a deep breath in hopes of clearing her head and summoning courage. Then Denise reached out her clammy right hand and rang the doorbell. After what seemed like an eternity of loneliness on the front stoop, the door opened. The smiling face of a stranger greeted Denise with a congenial “Hello and how are you on this fine night?” Not sure what to say in return, Denise obliged with small talk of her own, “I am fine, how are you?” After a moment of uncomfortable silence, she said, “I am here for the celebration. I am a friend of Dan's.”

The man at the door said, “Oh, of course, Debbie, right?”

“No, actually, it's Denise,” she responded feigning a smile.

“Denise, that's right. Welcome. The celebration is just beginning. Come on in.”

Denise entered the great room overfilled with excited partygoers. She quickly scanned the crowd looking for acknowledgment from a familiar face. However, finding none, she anxiously edged her way around the room trying to convince herself to stay. Everyone seemed to belong but her. There were small groups all around the room; some seated, some standing, some near the kitchen and others in the den. Her anxiety continued to grow. Denise was lost in the crowd, longing for someone, anyone to acknowledge her.

Nursing her diet Coke and her feelings of rejection, Denise decided to just leave. Just as she approached the door she thought she heard someone say her name. She spun to see and found no one returning her gaze. When she turned back to the door, she heard it again.

“Denise. Hey, Denise.”

Yes. This time for sure someone was calling her name. As she turned she saw Dan's warm familiar smile.

“Denise, I am so glad you are here.”

With a deep sigh of relief, Denise said, “I am, too, Dan.” Giving him a big hug she whispered, “Now, I am too.” Denise was no longer lost in the crowd. She belonged. Someone there knew her by name, and that changed everything.

Your name—it is a simple word, is it not? It is quite possible that you have heard it more than nearly any other spoken word. Some have said it with a curse and many have spoken it with love.

A name is the one true possession of every human being. It is said that one of the most important things you can do for someone is remember him or her by name. A name is precious and fragile. Like Denise's experience, when a name is used correctly, it brings joy; when forgotten or mishandled, it leads to heartache. There are those who abuse names, and those who give others a self-esteem boost when the word tumbles from their lips. Your name precedes you wherever you go and lingers long after you have departed. Your name represents who you are and strikes a response, some times positive and at other times negative, in the minds of those who know you. At the mention of your name, those who know you best conjure up mental images of your face, mannerisms and personal qualities. All of this comes at the mention of your name. You could even say that it is by your name that you are known in this world. Ah yes, the power of the name.

With that in mind, I invite you again to listen to a portion of this morning's Scripture lessons:

First, in the forty-third chapter of Isaiah, the prophet writes, "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) Israel was lost and God reminded them to whom they belonged. God called them by name.

And from the Gospel of John, chapter 10 – Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Did you hear it? Did you catch the common thread? God, the Almighty, knows your name. But it is more than that; God not only knows your name, but also calls you by name. Imagine that. God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, knows you by name. God, the Author of salvation and Redeemer of the world, calls you by name.

It is comforting to know that God is there. I think that this is something that we all would probably agree is good and could acknowledge with a certain level of confidence. We can go about our daily lives, doing our own thing, minding our own business, setting goals, chasing dreams all the while giving intellectual assent to a God who is there. Julian of Norwich once said, "Some of us believe that God is almighty and can do everything; and that he is all-wise and may do everything; but that he is all love and will do everything—there we draw back" (*The Revelations of Divine Love*, p. 73).

Now I must confess that to think that God knows and calls me by name shakes me more than just a little. Consider all that it means. If God knows and calls us by name it somehow changes everything. God can no longer be kept at comfortable distance as some ultimate power who is simply there. It is from this truth that "we draw back."

If God knows and calls us by name that means God knows who we are. Before such a God, we can no longer portray someone we are not nor may we pretend *not* to be someone we are. This is God's call to confession. In *Let Your Life Speak*, author Parker Palmer writes, "I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace it all." (*Let Your Life Speak*, p. 66). This call to confession is a call to admit who it is that we are.

After all, God knows who we are and loves us anyway! It is we who pretend not to notice our true identity. A God who calls us by name embraces us even in our own frailty. Brian Mahan, a teacher at Candler School of Theology at Emory University writes in his book *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, "Consider this gift of the only self you have available to you at the moment to be just the gift God wishes to receive from you." He playfully continues, "Now, feel free to dance quietly in your pew" (*Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, p. 179).

A God who calls us by name invites us all to live a life characterized by confession; confession of our true identity as conflicted and duplicitous people. "God, this is who I am. I am a broken person. I am in need

of you. I am separated from you. I am lost and need to be found.” Warts and all, failures and missteps, this is the person who God loves.

Before a God who calls us by name there can be no pretense. We might as well acknowledge and confess all that we are; both sinner and saint. God knows us and calls us by name accepting us as we are.

But, we have another problem. In our noisy culture, there is a cacophony of voices attempting to shape us in their image. Buy this, drive that, look like them, wear these, work more, try harder. The noise seems to join together and with one deafening voice this stranger in our midst shouts into our minds that we do not measure up, we are not good enough, and we will never amount to anything. Even our achievements and accomplishments cannot muffle the voices for long. The voice of the stranger, the deceiver has the capacity to overpower us and entice us away from honesty with our selves and our God. “These negative voices are so loud and so persistent,” writes Henri Nouwen, “that it is easy to believe them. That is the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection...When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions” (*Life of the Beloved* p. 27).

God knows and calls us by name and invites us to turn away from the voices of the strangers in our midst and turn toward the voice we know and long to hear; the voice of the Shepherd. God loves us and knows who we really are and who we are called to be. This is God’s call to repentance—a turning away from the false self to the true person God has created us to be—a dearly and deeply loved child of God. Nothing can ever take this true identity away from us; nothing.

The bottom line is this: through Christ, God has redeemed us. Our name has been made good. This is not wishful thinking or an attempt to boost self-esteem or rugged individualism. No, it is fact. We have been set free from our shadowy selves; released from self-pity, self-doubt, self-abasement ... and all of the artificial identities to which we cling.

The Shepherd calls the sheep by name and they respond to God’s voice, the voice of genuine love and tender acceptance. Israel is once again reminded of her true identity as a people redeemed by God.

You see, we cannot force God to love us more nor can we make God love us less. Understanding this is a call to freedom. This is God’s call to new life. God not only calls us by name, but God will not forget who we are even when we do. Our identity in God is secure.

Brennan Manning writes in the *Ragamuffin Gospel*, “The child of God doesn’t have to struggle to get herself in a good position for having a relationship with God; (the child of God) doesn’t have to craft ingenious ways of explaining his position to Jesus; (the child of God) doesn’t have to create a pretty face for herself; (the child of God) doesn’t have to achieve any state of spiritual feeling or intellectual understanding. All the child has to do is happily accept...the gift of the Kingdom.” (Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 51)

The voice of the Almighty calls us by name beckoning us to the beautiful life of acceptance, love and grace. Because of this, we can confidently stand before God, understanding and reveling in our true identity as children of the King. This is who we are.

Every night ends in much the same way in the Shivers’ household. After a bath and teeth brushing, Jennifer, Allison and I gather in Allison’s room for stories, maybe a little tickle time and then evening prayers. We take turns praying at the end of the day, and Allison is always first. Every night Allison’s prayer follows a similar format. She first prays for family members or friends. Then she says the following,

“Dear God, thank you for grandmas and grandpas, for mommy and daddy, and for Allison Taylor Shivers. Amen.” She names herself in her own prayer. I am not sure where she learned this, but I am not about to tell her to stop. Somehow, Allison gets it. There is a deep spiritual truth in her prayer. God knows and calls her by name. This six-year-old accepts who she is and gives thanks at the end of her day for who God has created her to be.

Tonight, when you pray, do you have the courage to do the same? Can you thank God for yourself by name?

Dear friend, God knows us and calls us by name and that should change everything. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Listen, do you here that? Strip away all of the noise of the world. Peel away your own feelings of inadequacy. Let go of your desire to earn your way to privilege and acceptance. Listen. Now revealed for your true self, hear the voice of tender acceptance as God calls you by name.

So now, stand revealed and revel in God's love and tender acceptance both today and forevermore! Amen.