

There's Something in a Name

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146;
I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've made the round of Back-to-School nights to meet my children's teachers and see their daily schedules. Two Thursdays ago I attended the elementary Back-to-School night. When I entered my youngest child's classroom, her teacher, Mrs. Yeager, chuckled as she said, "You need to see how Rebecca addressed you in a note on her desk." See, all the children had been asked to write a short message to their parents. Rebecca began hers thusly: "Dear Nancy . . ."

Now, she does not usually call me "Nancy." None of my three children do so. I don't know what possessed her to address me that way. Of course, the mother sitting in the next seat over from me also chuckled when she read **her** daughter's note, which began, "Dear Parent . . ."

We do sit up and notice when our name is called, don't we? Most of us like having our name called—at least when we're not in trouble. Most of us like having our name known. It's useful to have your name known, unless you have the same name as someone else. Here at Trinity there are two Nancy's in our office. Nancy Martin, the church office manager, and me—Nancy Easton. Sometimes Pastor Hardy will call out from his office, "Nancy—can I see you for a second?" and we both charge to the door. Sometimes people call in to Trinity and ask for Nancy, only to find out they've been patched in to the wrong Nancy's voice mail. One time a family requested that Nancy sing at their loved one's funeral. Pastor Hardy thought the request was for me. It was not. It was for Nancy Martin. I, however, was not offended. In fact, I gave a sigh of relief, because the song the family wanted sung was designed for a first soprano, and I'm more a second alto. Nancy Martin did a lovely job. Yes, even with the occasional moment of confusion, I like having my name known. And I am always glad to meet you and learn your name.

The sick, hungry beggar in our parable this morning has a name. Lazarus. Do you realize he's the **only** person in all of Jesus' parables with a name? Every other story Jesus told, at least as recorded in our four Gospels, has people **without** any names mentioned. The sower sowing seed. The prodigal son. The good Samaritan. The dishonest manager. The lady searching for the lost coin. Now surely, in real life, they would have had names. They would have been known by others. But the only person named with a name by Jesus in any of his parables is this poor man on the doorstep of the rich man's house. Recall how the story opens: *There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores . . .*

The significance of his having a name, and particularly this name, cannot be overlooked. In Hebrew, Lazarus—*'el'etser*—means means "God helps" or "Helped by God." The fact that the poor man has a name, and that it can be translated this way tells us something important about God. God knows Lazarus. God cares about Lazarus. And God, by the end of this parable, will have blessed Lazarus with good things.

Now contrast God's knowing, naming and caring for his children with our human tendency for disregarding other human beings. We see it right here in this parable. The rich man walks past

Lazarus every day. Ignores him. Goes into the house and feasts every day while just outside the door Lazarus starves. The funny thing is that, actually, the rich man **knows** Lazarus' name. But he only names Lazarus when it becomes opportunistic for him, when later on in the story he figures he can use Lazarus as water boy and messenger. See, this refusing to put a name to the beggar at his door is one way for the rich man to deny the existence of Lazarus. Every century is riddled with incidents where humans are considered anonymous, expendable, less-than-human, and are ignored, neglected or, in some cases, treated horribly. I'll bet if you looked at many of those incidents you'd find those persons were **not** referred to by name. For example, within our own lifetime, African-American males weren't called by their name. They were called "Boy" and, in groups, "You people." Consider the plight of Jews and others rounded up during World War II and sent off to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. They had no name to render them any dignity, any sense of worth as human beings. No, a number was tattooed on their forearms. They were considered nothing more than that number, and usually less than that.

Two events converged to remind me of the importance of a name. One was the arrival of the president of Iran on our shores, who spoke at several venues. Before speaking at the United Nations, he made an appearance at Columbia University. One would not say he received a pleasant introduction, as Columbia's president clearly stated that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was, in fact, "a petty and cruel dictator." But there was probably good reason to call him such. Not only for the alleged human rights abuses in his own country and his inflammatory rhetoric, but also for his holding a two-day conference last year for Holocaust deniers, those historical revisionists who claim the Holocaust never took place.

Ahmadinejad comes to the United States the same week that I'm watching Ken Burns' documentary on World War II. That documentary continues into this week on WITF-TV, but last week I was seeing inklings of the brutality of the Nazi regime against anyone deemed racially inferior to the pure German people. That the stories and photographs and documentation of the Holocaust could be disbelieved and disregarded is troubling, to say the least. That anyone would systematically ridicule, imprison, starve and murder countless people because they are members of a particular group is not just troubling but excruciating to imagine. Yet, during World War II, lots of people the world over could scarcely imagine it. And I know this week, through this documentary, I will hear stories of the American soldiers who liberated those concentration camps and came to see the truth of the Holocaust Event.

When my husband Randy and I traveled to Israel in 1990, we visited the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. The museum has a particular name—*Yad Vashem*—and the translation of that name, like the translation of Lazarus' name, is ripe with meaning. *Yad Vashem* means simply "a name." It is a phrase taken from the prophet Isaiah, the 56th chapter, verse 5: (*Thus says the Lord*) *I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.* Six million Jews, along with many other persons, perished in the Holocaust, and so the museum in Jerusalem calls itself *Yad Vashem*, "a name," to declare aloud that each and every person who suffered in those ghettos and concentration camps had a name, and that museum will remember them. In fact, for the last 17 years now, there has been an annual public recitation of victims' names at *Yad Vashem* through their memorial project which is called, "Unto Every Person There is a Name." They continue to collect documentation for their database and add to their list more names to say on that special remembrance day.

For, you see, to call someone by their name is to recognize and validate their existence as a human being, their value and worth. Tormentors would be loathe to do something like that. And even folks who aren't really tormentors can fall into the same trap of ignoring persons deemed to be a Lazarus. The truth is, it is easy for folks like us, many of us living comfortable middle-to-

upper-class lives, to forget that Lazarus exists—the poor, hungry, homeless and outcast are among us. Jesus, with this parable, wakes us up to that truth. And the other lessons linked to this Gospel passage push that same message. In this week’s Old Testament passage from the Prophet Amos, we hear him rail against the upper classes and how they live. It’s not that they were particularly evil people, these wealthy folks—even Jesus doesn’t say the rich man was particularly bad or was a murderer or an embezzler—but the reality was that, like the rich man in the Gospel, the wealthy folks Amos talks about had become so complacent in their bounty, so secure in their financial situation, and so used to having pretty much whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it, they had forgotten there were those who still lacked the basic necessities of life. They were insulated in their comfortable lifestyle from the harsher realities of many Israelites and couldn’t see Lazarus, even though he was right there in front of them. They were so insulated, they also could not imagine a life without the things to which they’d become accustomed. Yet they, too, prophesied Amos, would end up being led into poverty and exile by foreign powers. (From an historical point of view, we know that Amos’ prophecy points to the Assyrian nation, which eventually subdues Israel.) The rich had no idea what lay ahead. They would become like Lazarus, and soon would know what it felt like to be poor, homeless, nameless.

Then consider Paul’s words in his first letter to Timothy, a young church leader Paul mentored. Paul reminded Timothy how good it was to be content with simple things like food and clothing. These basic items were a blessing from God, who richly gave such good things for our enjoyment. Timothy was to preach to his congregation that hope shouldn’t be pinned on riches, but rather, hope should be pinned on the God who provided those wonderful basic things like food and clothing. Then, hoping in God, God’s people could be generous with those things, ready to share God’s blessings—those riches they themselves had received. Don’t you think that’s true? If a person can truly appreciate the basic things—a hearty meal, a warm coat, a place to lay our head—relish that nourishing food on the table and shelter from a storm, and know those things are gifts from God, then we might just go about our days making sure all peoples have such good things. We would see the Lazarus at our doorstep, know them and want to care for them.

After all, God knows and cares for them. So says the Psalmist in our Psalm this morning: *(The Lord) is the one who keeps every promise forever, who gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry . . . The Lord lifts the burdens of those bent beneath their loads . . . The Lord cares for the orphans and widows . . .*

Just remember that name—Lazarus (*‘el’etser*), “God helps.” By giving Lazarus a name, this particular name, Jesus Christ takes up the mantle from patriarchs and psalmwriters and prophets of old, proclaiming the Lord God always did and always will care for the poor and lowly. His promises to reverse their fortunes remain intact, and will be fulfilled.

Meanwhile, those of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead—those of us who follow Jesus Christ, have also been given a name, a particular name whose meaning and significance should not be overlooked. We are called Christians. And we are commanded by this One whose name we bear to care for the poor and lowly, too. **AMEN.**

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