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Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

Tell Me Your Name

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Years ago, I was working as a volunteer at a General Assembly meeting for our denomination. General Assembly is the national conference or business meeting for our denomination. At every General Assembly there are ministers and elders in attendance from all over the nation. And there is a lot of stress on everyone. There is a lot of business to be accomplished and – at that time – a lot of paper to keep up with, read and digest to be able to act on the business at hand. And, my job at the General Assembly was to make sure that those who were voting had the papers they needed. And, more than once, a minister or elder would storm up to my desk and accuse me of not giving them the paper that they needed and could not find. Because they were sometimes sleep deprived and sometimes just mean, they would berate me for not doing my job and in other ways not be very nice. But, what I discovered is that if I found out something about them and made a connection – identified someone we knew in common – that their attitude suddenly changed dramatically. Even if I said, “Tell me your name”, their tone would change. Being named, held them accountable. Instead of berating me and treating me as if I were nobody, once I had established that I knew someone who knew them – or if I knew their name - the complainer was no longer anonymous and so suddenly they decided to be nicer.

We have probably all had that experience. Either we discover that someone we thought was a stranger knows our parents, or works with one of our best friends. And it happens the other way too. When someone treats us like we are invisible or worse, and then they discover that we have friends in common, how they treat us changes.

I think about that experience sometimes when I see what people post online. There are many wonderful things that technology does, but I don't count the ability of people to comment on everything, in an all-but anonymous way, as one of the blessings of technology. I am constantly amazed, embarrassed, enraged and astounded by how people talk when they write things online. The comments online after Facebook posts or at the end of articles can be vicious and just plain mean. People say things – in the anonymity of the world wide web -things that they would never say to someone's face. And, I'd like to propose a guideline for the online presence of those who call themselves Christian. I'd like to propose that we NEVER write (or say) anything that we would not say to someone whom we know well. Do not presume to say what you think or to pass judgment on someone online. It does no good and serves no good

purpose. Instead, before we type a comment online, I think we should ask ourselves, “if I were standing in front of this person and they knew me by name, would I say this to them?” Or better yet, “If I were standing in front of this person and I realized that God knew them by name, would I say this to them?”

When we interact with those we do not know, it changes how we act when we assume that the person in front of us knows someone we know. When we think that we are anonymous and that no one knows us, we are somehow set free to be our worst selves. But Scripture says that we are not anonymous. And the people we meet and deal with are not anonymous. They are known to God by name. The server in the restaurant where you will eat lunch today is known to God by name. The mean person who cuts you off in traffic, is known to God by name. The person who writes that obnoxious editorial in the paper is known to God by name. The child abused by a parent is known to God by name. The parent who does the abusing, or the person convicted of drug trafficking, is known to God by name. The person with dementia, is known to God by name. And you and I are also known to God by name.

“I have called you by name, you are mine” says God through the prophet Isaiah. “You are precious in my site and honored, and I love you,” says God. “Do not fear, for I am with you,” says God.

The Prophet Isaiah writes to a people who are overwhelmed – under water! He writes to the children of Israel who are in exile in Babylon – slaves of a foreign nation – who believe that God has forgotten them. In the chapter just prior to what we read, Isaiah reminds them that reality is exactly the opposite. The children of Israel are where they are because of their own Sin and unfaithfulness. Israel was overrun by the Babylonian army because God did know them and knew that they were not faithful. So, their exile is a consequence of their own unfaithfulness. Their exile is a consequence of the fact that they were not anonymous. And, there in a foreign land they feel completely overwhelmed, forgotten and lost. And to those who are underwater and overwhelmed, expecting nothing good, God tells Isaiah to say: “Do not fear. I have called you by name, you are mine.” The rivers will not overwhelm and the fire will not consume or burn them up. In the midst of suffering – even suffering caused by our own sin – we are not anonymous. God has not forgotten us.

And Luke paints a picture of the Jews, under foreign rule by Rome, hoping, expecting a messiah who go out to the Jordan River to hear John the Baptist preach because they are expecting a messiah! They are hoping and expecting to be delivered from Rome’s rule. They are expecting deliverance. And so, when they hear John preaching repentance and talking about the Kingdom of God, they look at each other – daring to hope – Could this be it? Could John be the Messiah that God had promised to send? And to these people, God tells John to say, “The one that God will send is coming and will be much more powerful than I am. I baptize with water, but the one God is sending will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And, sure enough, Luke tells us that after Jesus was baptized and was praying that the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove and God’s voice said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

So, whether we are overwhelmed and feeling like we are sinking fast, or whether we are hopeful and thinking that the Messiah might be among us, God's message is the same. I am with you. I know you. To those who are overwhelmed and fearful, the message is "do not fear. We belong to God. God knows our name." And, to those who are expecting good things, the message is, "God is coming and is here now. God is with us."

Scripture teaches us that God is present, active and involved in the world and in our lives. And God knows us by name and loves us. And when we believe that, it changes how we view ourselves, others and the world.

When we baptize anyone – a baby or an adult – we baptize them using their whole name. God knows us by name. God says, in Isaiah, that "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" is known to God. Tell me – is there a person alive whom God did not create in God's own image? Is there a person who was not created for the purpose of glorifying God?

No. We are – all of us – made in the image of a God who knows us by name and who loves us. We are not alone – and to prove the point – God sent Jesus the Messiah, the beloved to be God's embodied presence with us. That is why we call Jesus "Emmanuel" – it means God is with us.

So, in the midst of grief, suffering, pain and loss – remember - we are known to God by name. Notice that Isaiah speaks to those who are in exile in a foreign land and who know war and suffering. And notice also that even when Jesus is standing beside John the Baptist at the River Jordan, the Gospel writer remembers that Herod was about to imprison John. God's love for us co-exists with our grief and pain and loss. When we suffer, when we grieve, when we are at a loss and feel as if the water is about to go over our heads, we are to remember that we are known by name to a God who loves us and formed us in God's own image. When we suffer, it does not mean that God has forgotten us. Instead, God suffers with us. God knows what it is to suffer.

And, in the midst of hope and joy and celebration, we are to remember that God has come to earth because we are so valuable to God. We are not anonymous. We are known and loved by the God who can separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad. The God who will judge the whole world is present even now with us in the person of The Son, the Beloved – who came so that we would know that God is both with us and for us.

So, no matter where you find yourself today, remember that when you were baptized, the preacher baptized you with your whole name – the name by which God knows you. And today we are to remember that God knows us – whether we are grieving or celebrating – God knows us. We are to do whatever we do in the sure and certain knowledge that God knows us. And we are to treat others in the certain knowledge that they, too, are known to God by name. God knows everyone who is made in God's image. We are not anonymous. We are all known.

So, today, before you leave, will you please turn to the people near you and say, "Please tell me your name." Then, remind them that this is the name by which they are known to God. You are known. They are known. And we are precious to God.

I couldn't help but end today with the first 2 catechism questions from the Presbyterian Children's catechism, *Belonging To God: A First Catechism*, that are printed in the bulletin.

Never forget:

Who are you?

I am a Child of God.

What does it mean to be a child of God?

That I belong to God, who loves me.