

Naming Rights

September 7th, 2014

Text

Exodus 3:1-15

Introduction

Some good friends of mine moved to an upscale North Shore community from a less salubrious part of Massachusetts.

Both husband & wife were educated professionals but they were accustomed to edgier, more blue-collar neighbourhoods. Neither of them had hung around with country club types or with people whose families came over on the Mayflower.

It was a HUGE culture shock!

One of the things that struck them the most was names.

Grown women were called “Muffy” & all the men had Roman numerals tacked on the end. Little boys had names such as “Forbes” & “Tucker” & “Chester”. While girls were “Cotton” & “Elspeth” &, of course, “Muffin.”

“They would have been beaten to a pulp in the playground of my old school,” the husband used to say!

Names tell us a lot about a person. Gender, ethnicity & social standing are all conveyed in the names we give our children.

If you meet a 5 yr. old who tells you he is Frederick Winslow IV, you know everything you need to know about his family background. Few parents who aren’t directly descended from the Plymouth settlers would think of calling little babies “Josiah” or “Constance”.

Names are mini biographies. They describe who we are & where we came from. Our image of a person, even our affection for a person, can be impacted by what they’re called.

The Importance of God's Name

And so it is with God!

The names & titles we use for God define the Holy for us.

That is why today's Scripture is such an important text.

We all know the story of Moses' encounter with the living God. Those of us who are over a certain age probably see it acted out by Charlton Heston whenever we read the passage!

The focus of this narrative is usually the burning bush. Fundamentalists & film-makers go for a pyrotechnical shrub. Liberal Biblical interpreters discuss vibrant red plants that grow in the Sinai peninsula.

The botanical basis of this narrative is not important. What is crucial is the conversation between Moses & God.

Moses, you will remember, had fled to Midian after he killed an Egyptian slave-master. There he marries the daughter of a priest & settles down as part of his father-in-law's household.

Meanwhile, the Israelites in Egypt were having a tougher & tougher time. So God decides to appoint Moses to lead the people to freedom. God reveals the Divine self to Moses in what we call a "theophany." He then explains the nature of his assignment.

Moses understands that God has given him a mission. But his was a world of many gods, so Moses needed to know which deity had picked him for this high-risk project. He probably also wanted to find out if this was a god he could reasonably refuse.

"What should I say when people ask me your name?" Moses inquires.

"Who are you?" in other words.

And *"why should I listen to you?"*

And God answers "I-AM-WHO-I-AM".

Man, that must have annoyed Moses!

I mean, here he was, being asked to abandon his pleasant life in Midian & risk everything on a dangerous mission to free slaves.

And God didn't even bother to tell him his name! Honestly!

God does then proceed to give Moses his name but it's just as enigmatic. God says that Moses should tell the Israelites he is the God of their ancestors.

He is "Yod-heh-vav-heh."

Jewish people inscribe this as YHVH or Yahweh.

The accepted translation for both Jews & Christians is "Lord" or "Adonai." But, fundamentally, "Yod-heh-vav-heh" means "*I am who I am*" or "*I shall be who I shall be.*"

God refused to be defined by a title. The barriers & boundaries that names engender are human inventions. And God wanted no part of them.

Instead, the Holy One invited Moses - & you & me - on a journey to discover the God who is not bound by human interpretations or theologies.

"I shall be what I shall be," God declares.

"Let my actions show you who I am."

"What I do reveals much more about me than what I'm called."

Theology as written by God!

Compare that to all the tomes written by humans!

Learning to Experience God Differently

Since I've been at CBC, I've spoken extensively about the language we use when talking about God.

Some of you are happy with the changes; others don't know what the fuss is all about. Then there are those who refuse to alter one word of a vocabulary learned in childhood.

Some years ago, Sister Joan Chittister began to change the exclusively male language her Order used to speak of the Divine.

A young nun came up to her & said:

"I know the language we use is wrong but these things take time. We have to do this carefully."

"Good idea," Sister Joan replied, *"Is 2,000 years tippy-toe enough for you?"*ⁱ

The fact is there are two reasons to expand our God vocabulary. Firstly, we do so because it is right & just. We must stop using words and expressions that exclude others from the immensity of Divine grace.

The second reason to watch our language is far more important. How we speak about God determines how we relate to God. Our spirituality is formed by the words & images we employ when we talk to God or about God.

If we constantly refer to God as a judge, we are likely to have a very judgmental view of the Divine. A “God hates gays & so do I” kind of mentality.

Addressing God as our “Father” is Biblical. But if your earthly dad was a tyrant, it will be harder for you to experience God’s gentleness.

The problem with symbols of God is that our minds translate them into realities about the Divine.

Elizabeth Johnson – a Sister of St. Joseph & Professor of Theology at Fordham University – writes that while Christianity officially states that God is spirit & beyond gender, our speech about God gives an entirely different message. Religious language conveys the idea that *“God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than female.”*^{xi}

Dr. Johnson concludes that symbols for God function. They turn words or images into a make-believe reality.

Gender is not the only problem with our God speech. We tend to privilege power titles over nurturing ones; & human-centered names over ones that indicate God’s connection to the natural world.

Joan Chittister writes:

“A world that does not nurture its weakest, does not know God the birthing mother. A world that does not preserve the planet, does not know God the creator. A world that does not honour the spirit of compassion, does not know God the spirit.

God the lawgiver, God the judge, God the omnipotent being have consumed Western spirituality and, in the end, shriveled its heart.”^{xiii}

We are people with shriveled hearts!

We have so restricted our names for & images of God, that we have lost sight of how amazingly wonderful & radically loving the Creator is.

Sister Joan contrasts traditional Christian language about God with the panoply of names the Hindu faith gives the Divine.^{iv} Hindu names for the Divine touch on every aspect of life. They celebrate God's presence in the small things as well as the grand. They emphasize the Divinity within nature as well as within humankind.

In the Hindu tradition, God is recognized everywhere & so everywhere becomes graced with his presence.

No word or image can fully capture who God is. Any single expression for the Divine will leave out far more than it includes. But the more names we employ when we speak of God, the richer our understanding becomes.

Learning to Name Differently

The names of people & institutions that we cherish have a special place in our hearts.

Witness the controversy over the Washington Redskins! Keeping or changing that name has become yet another divisive issue in the nation's capital.

You here went through a naming crisis. Nobody liked the thought of calling this church anything other than Community Baptist. Rightly so! "Community Baptist Church" says everything anyone needs to know about our faith community.

Unfortunately, our favourite names for God are not so informative. Rather than increase our understanding & appreciation of God's self, they tend to do the opposite.

Always calling God "father", means that we don't get to experience God as a nurturing mother.

Using expressions of power like "Lord" all the time separates us from the God who suffers. And it helps to close off our hearts from human suffering also.

Terms of grandeur like such as “Majesty” & “Almighty” rightly honour God. But they don’t reflect the Divine presence in the tiniest sparrow or the smallest flower.

When it comes to talking about God, we need to watch our mouths!

So... I would like to invite you to try to experiment with different names when you address God or speak of God. Start off with Biblical terms & then look to other faiths to see how they name the Holy.

In the Hinduism, there are considered to be a thousand names for God. They include titles such as “*Patience*” & “*The Inexhaustible Treasure*”.^v

Imagine praying every morning to your “Inexhaustible Treasure”! Wouldn’t that put the day in proper perspective?!

Joyce Rupp (the third nun in this morning’s trilogy of spiritual writers) has compiled a book entitled, “*Fragments of Your Ancient Name*.”^{vi}

In this devotional work, Joyce draws on a number of faiths to give God a different name for every day of the year. Each name is accompanied by a prayer or reflection. It is a 365 –day meditation on the nature of God.

Daily entries range from the staid “*Holy Trinity*” to the gentle “*Drifting Mist*.” If we image God as a drifting mist, it will remind us that God is all around us ...

But my favourite title from this book is, “*Extravagant Persistence*.” Isn’t it absolutely true?

God IS an extravagant persistence in our lives! Otherwise none of us would be here today.

Conclusion

Symbols for God are wonderful ways to make the immensity & mystery of God seem more real & more intimate.

But they are just that – symbols.

The Creator & Sustainer of the Cosmos is infinitely greater & richer & more wonderful than any one name or any one faith tradition can capture.

God told Moses that his name was “*I shall be who I shall be*.”

It was an invitation for Moses to discover for himself God’s nature.

God says exactly the same to us.

Don't try to define me with trite theological statements.

Don't box me in with a handful of Church names.

Get to know who I am by what I do.

Get to know & love the real me.

When Moses took God up on his offer it changed his life.

Getting to know God on a deeply personal level helped Moses transform a people & their faith.

Think what it could do for us!

Amen

ⁱ Joan Chittister, "In Search of Belief" (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 1999) 25

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Johnson, "She Who Is" (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000) 5

ⁱⁱⁱ Joan Chittister, "Heart of Flesh" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998) 112

^{iv} Chittister, "In Search of Belief", 23

^v *ibid.*

^{vi} Joyce Rupp, "Fragments of Your Ancient Name" (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2011)