

From This Corner

When a Name Is Called

John 20: 1-18

Names are important and powerful. We can be in a crowd and if our name is called we will look for the one who spoke. Even though others may have the same name it is intensely personal to us.

Our names also carry with them associations. “Jerry”, for instance was the school delinquent. To this day, I do not know what his problem was. He was the first terrorist I ever knew. He was the “Osama” of Lyndonville. He seemed to come to school every day with a new bag of mean things to do to pupils and teachers alike.

I also wonder about names. For instance, I wonder what Mary, the mother of Jesus, thinks about Madonna. What would their meeting be like?

I began thinking about the power of names rereading the Easter story in John, chapter 20, specifically verse 16. “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’” It was not until Jesus addressed her by name that she recognized who he was. It was when Jesus called her name that she became the first of the disciples to experience Easter.

Gail R. O’Day in The New Interpreter’s Bible calls this passage “...one of the New Testament’s most poignant images of the grace and delight of the resurrection: the moment of recognition when Mary hears Jesus call her by name.” (Abingdon, 1995)

Do you see the import of that? In the midst of all this strangeness, all this alienation, all of this grief, all of this confusion, Jesus called her name! “Mary!” She saw clearly only when her name was called. “Mary!” So it is. The real meaning of Easter dawns on us when we hear our name called.

The Easter story has within it the clue to effective disciple-making and church growth. All around our churches are people with names who often remain “nameless” to us. We may call them the “un-churched” or some equally odd and impersonal term. Because we do not know them, they remain a mystery to us. In turn, we remain even more of a mystery to them. The result is they remain outside the fellowship of the Body of Christ.

The story of Easter reminds us that our God is a god who models a very personal approach to evangelism. It also suggests to us that the reality and truth of the resurrection is understandable only to those who have had a personal experience with Jesus.

Think about it. I would be willing to bet that you are a participant in the life of the church because someone who cared about you called you by name.

Our mission is to introduce others to Jesus, and help make disciples. To do this we must first get to know our neighbors' names. The "un-churched" will remain just that until Jesus' followers get to know their names and care about them. Within the reach of your church there is a woman named Mary. Within the reach of your church is a man by the name of Tom. Jesus is calling you to know and call their names. Jesus is calling you to follow his example of getting to know people in your communities. Jesus calls you to get to know them before you share the significance of His risen presence.

What would happen, I wonder, if this Eastertide three of us from each of our churches skipped a church meeting and instead went to some other community gathering and met three other people? What would happen if the three of us got to know a new name and who the person was with that name? What would happen if the three of us after getting to know our new friends invited them to attend our church to get to know the one whose name is Jesus? My guess is the United Methodist Church would experience the resurrection. That's what happens when a name is called.

Larry R. Baird