

Most people would say that engineers are in a class all their own. SO, 2 engineers were standing at the base of a flagpole, looking at its top. A woman walked by and asked what they were doing. "We're supposed to find the height of this flagpole," said Sven, "but we don't have a ladder." The woman took a wrench from her purse, loosened a couple of bolts, and laid the pole down on the ground. Then she took a tape measure from her purse, took a measurement, announced, 21.5 feet," and walked away.

One engineer shook his head and laughed, "A lot of good that does us. We ask for the height, and she gives us the length!"

Both engineers have since quit their engineering jobs and have been elected to Congress.

First, a couple of background notes on this very complex gospel text. After asking the disciples who 'the people' say that He was, Jesus directly asks them what they believed. Whenever anybody meets God in the Bible and asks God questions, God's answer is usually to reverse the relationship and answer the question not with an answer – but with a question. (The classic Jewish joke is "Why does a rabbi always answer a question with another question? And the answer is Why SHOULDN'T a rabbi answer a question with another question?") God always does that: He reverses the relationship by asking rather than answering. So when Jesus gathers His disciples, He does not begin by TELLING them who He is but by ASKING them who THEY are. To those who were following Jesus in John's Gospel, His first words to them are, "What are you looking for?" (Jn 1:38). He questions our questions, our desires, our loves, our hurts, and our hearts.

Every choice we make is our answer to His question: "Now who do YOU say that I am? Your Lord or your servant? Shall it be my will or yours?" (adapted from Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, p. 629-630)

The other thing I want to note is when Jesus said, "I say to you, you are Peter," He changed the name Simon was born with. That name-changing was and still is strictly forbidden by orthodox Jewish law, because only God can change a person's name, since our name is seen as not just a humanly chosen set of letters, but our identity and our destiny. Only God can change our name because only God can change our destiny. God changed Abram's name to Abraham and his wife Sarai's name to Sarah and Jacob's name to Israel. So changing Simon's name to Peter was one of the many ways Jesus claimed divine authority. (Ibid, Kreeft, p. 632-633) And also changed Peter's destiny.

So, second, a bit of a theology of names. But first a little trivia contest. Can anyone tell me the name of the 33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States? Harry S. Truman. Question number 2: What was Truman's home state? That's right, Missouri. Last question. What did the "S" stand for in Harry S Truman? Trick question: nothing. Both his grandfathers had names beginning with S so he was given the bare initial S to avoid having to choose between them.

Names are fascinating. One of my high school friends middle initial was "T." I never knew what the T stood for. Once at a party another friend announced that he had discovered what that "T" stood for: It stood for "Theophilus," the person Luke says he wrote his Gospel for. But my high school friend's explanation for THEOPHILUS about our mutual friend was "The doctor said when he was born "That's the awfulest baby I ever saw!"

OK, let's get serious. Names have immense power, as Judaism recognized. The Hebrew word for name (Shem) appears a whopping 864 times in the Old Testament. Rabbi Benjamin Blech explains, "Names represent our identity.....they define us....they are to some extent prophetic. They capture our essence. They

are the keys to our soul.” In the Jewish understanding, our true names come from God. You have heard me quote Pope Francis who marvels at God’s humility in that God will call us by the name given to us by our parents for all eternity. The name really comes from God.

Jesus grasped the importance of names better than anyone. He gave some of His closest companions special names – unique keys to their souls. Simon becomes Rocky, or Peter. James and John apparently had quick tempers and He called them “BOANERGES, that is Sons of Thunder (Mk 3:16-17). Jesus had gotten to know His disciples well enough to give them nicknames – names that empowered and claimed them as His.

In today’s Gospel, it takes the disciples a while to come up with the correct name for Jesus. “Who do you say that I am” tells us we have to realize 2 things. One, the only right answer to what someone’s real name is: the name God calls them. We are told in the text that Simon is inspired by God -- “for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven.” Simon recognizes Jesus as God recognizes Him – “Son of God” and “Messiah.” Simon Peter is the one who gets this answer right, because he knows firsthand what it was like to be renamed by the God of love. The message is clear: We see people for who they really are only when we see them as God sees them. And though, with all our might, we resist putting on our God-glasses and calling other people by their right names, God’s name for every single person on earth is “my beloved child.”

Naming other people wields power, and power can be either empowering and liberating or downgrading and dangerous. Does Jesus ask other people who they think He is because He wants other people to define Him? Unlikely. Jesus knows darn well who He is. He asks, then, not because other people’s answers will tell Him who He is, but because their answers will tell Him everything about who they are. Jesus is savvy. He understands that few things reveal more about us than the names we use to describe people different from ourselves.

Think of the all the wounding names people today call those who experience homelessness, those who live in poverty, women, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, people who are LGBTQ, people who are from other countries, people of a different religion, people of the opposing political party. Trailer trash. Bum. Welfare queen. Commie. Lunatic. Wetback, and others I don’t want to even say anywhere, let alone in church. But these names belong to no one. No one wants these names, nor should we ever use them. Julia Dinsmore, who grew up in poverty, wrote a beautiful poem whose title says it all: “My Name Is Child of God, Not ‘Those People.’”

When Jesus hears us hurl these wrong names, Jesus considers them a name we’ve called HIM: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of these least ones, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40) (adapted from Jacqueline A. Bussie, LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS, Fortress Press, 2018, p. 50-53)

Third, we were all given a new name in our baptism: welcomed with joy, Temple of God’s Glory, Priest, Prophet, King, New Creation, Child of God, Member of God’s holy people. As the Eucharistic Prayer says: “From age to age you gather A people to yourself, So that from the rising of the sun to its setting, A perfect offering may be made To the glory of your name.

We, not someone smarter or richer, but WE, WE are the people God gathers.

Ever since I’ve become a priest I’ve been sort of haunted by those words from the Baptismal Rite for children, “What name do you give this child?” And every time I hear of some violent shooting, it hits me hard. One of those poor misguided souls left a note before he went to the mall in Omaha in 2007 and began shooting. The note read, “Now, I’ll be famous.” At last, he would have a name.

*“This is not claimed as original material; it is the fruit of years of reading and research, collated by volunteers, but not always correctly footnoted, or not footnoted at all. It was created solely for the purpose of an oral proclamation in the context of the liturgy of the church. Every effort has been made to provide the necessary attribution to the authors of the sources.”*

I cannot help but wonder how this story might have ended had he known his true name, some name other than 'Killer,' the one by which we all now know him.

What does it mean to come to Mass every weekend and be called "brothers and sisters" and "dear friends in Christ"? How can we stand as brothers and sisters to people we have never met? How can we live as "dear friends in Christ" with those we dislike or fear? (adapted from Melissa Musick Nussbaum, from FORMATION: LITURGY, Dearly Beloved, We are Gathered, May 2008, p. 5)

Mark Labberton, in an article called "Leading by naming" writes: "DALITS (Untouchables) in India are required by Hindu law to be given one name, and it must be derogatory: Ugly, Dung, Stupid. Imagine the transformation when they discover that in Christ, GOD came as a DALIT – an Untouchable – and that He has the power to rename them: Chosen. Holy. Beloved Child. (HOMILETICS, Sept-Oct 2009, p. 40)

A story to conclude. In the musical play, THE MAN OF LA MANCHA, the grand, starry-eyed idealist, Don Quixote, meets a harlot named Aldonza. He shocks her by telling her she will be his lady; as a knight who protected the fair loveliness of a princess, he calls her 'Dulcinea', 'my sweet one,' and says she is his lady. She laughs at that idea with scorn. But Don Quixote follows the same psychology that Jesus used – he keeps affirming her and declaring her to be what he wants to believe she is. She reacts with every reaction there is – disdain, contempt, mockery, anger, humiliation, shame. She weeps that she was born in a ditch, and left to die; that she is a kitchen slut, a strumpet, that she is nothing at all. As she runs confused and lost into the night, Don Quixote calls after her, "But you are MY lady, Dulcinea." Somehow his hopeful prophecy for her becomes self-fulfilling. At the end, there is a scene where the dreamer of impossible dreams is dying; and there comes to his side a beautiful vision, a queen, an angel. "Who are you?" he whispers; and the lady, proud and humble at the same time, replies, "Don't you remember? You gave me a new name. You called me Dulcinea." (SHADYSIDE, Holland, #66, p. 5-6)

Never forget your new name, your real name, brothers and sisters, you are all beloved ones of God. We spend our lives trying to live into such a lovely name. Claim it. Amen.