
What's in a Name?

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
St. Francis Day – Year C

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And whatever the man called every living creature, that was his name. Whatever man called every living, creature that was his name.”

Several years ago on St. Francis Day, I had my youngest son stand at the top of the steps, holding our 22-pound Jack Russell terrier and I told you a story about that twenty pounds of energy. Energy. Energy. Cornering a huge llama that I had to go and rescue. There were other stories like that. This Jack Russell terrier, who became known to us as a Jack Russell terrorist.

What I didn't tell you, though, is that his name is John Henry. Now you know John Henry from the tales of John Henry, the great mythic hero, that bigger-than-life muscle builder of railroads. And it seemed perfect to have this 22-pound Jack Russell terrorist named John Henry because that's what we always experienced—him taking over the house or taking over the playground or taking over the car. Larger-than-life, bigger than you ever thought he would be

But it does pose an interesting question: what's in a name? Really, what's in a name?

In our Genesis reading this morning, we have an account of Genesis where God turns to man, creates all of these wonderful things, parades them before the man, and whatever the man names them, that's what they will be. Whatever the man names them that's what they will be.

And we know that names carry great meaning. We can provide comfort to each other simply by naming the sorrows that we experience. We can instill confidence in another simply by naming traits that the other has not realized.

There was a time with this passage was interpreted to mean that people, men, humans dominated nature. We were to use nature for our own benefit. We were to name it and control it. Names have that power.

But the better interpretation of this passage is that we are to be stewards of creation. We are to bring creation forth in all of its glory. In naming it, we are to give it life. And this concept of stewardship is, I think, what we often experience with our pets. The names we give our pets are different from their genus or breed. You may explain that this is a yellow lab, but in calling that lab by name—Bruno, for example—you are saying something else. There is a relationship. There an intimacy there. A connection that is there.

So what's in a name?

I want to tell you that St. Francis, contrary to popular opinion, was not a lover of creation. St. Francis, contrary to popular opinion, did not love animals. St. Francis did not love any abstract category. St. Francis loved particular beings, particular

creatures, usually whatever was right in front of him. Each creature, each person, had his or her or its own unique being. He saw it. He embraced it. He loved it.

It was St. Francis, for example, during the Fifth Crusade when Pope Innocent the third was calling forth all of Christendom to take back Jerusalem, excoriating Muslims as being heretics worthy of being killed, it was St. Francis who, on a mission for peace, engaged individual Muslims.

It was St. Francis who, by story, liberated the turtledoves from the marketplace, returning them to nature, but only after chastising them for being so lazy as to be caught.

It was St. Francis who, in his gentleness, was full of care for all of creation. It wasn't about abstract categories. It wasn't about names that categorize or isolate or distance. It was about names that personalize and connect and give life. That was the earthiness of St. Francis, the earthiness that we all remember and love.

It's interesting, for example, that we all know St. Francis. He must be the most popular saint around, but he didn't really write very much. There was something about his gentleness, his compassion, his care, that brings us to life.

I was thinking, for example, of a conversation between Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist, monk who asked Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk, "What did you learn during your first year in a monastery? What was the most powerful lesson that you learned in all of this solitude and intention and contemplation?"

And Thich Nhat Hanh answered, "I learned to close doors quietly."

There is something about St. Francis and his ability to relate through compassion and gentleness and care to what was in front of him that I think gives us a model of faith, that tells us something important about God, that leads us into a deeper, richer, more faithful life.

To illustrate this, I want to leave you with a story. You may not realize this, but many people attribute our fascination with the crèche scenes at Christmas to St. Francis, because it was St. Francis who, upon coming back to Assisi, decided that he would find a pregnant woman and gather all of these animals into a particular place and invite a priest to say Mass there, and invite all of the town to come out and participate.

It was St. Francis, in this moment, who related the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Lord to all of creation. That crèche scene, the ones we have on our mantle or our tables at Christmas, is a standing symbol to the carefulness, the gentleness, the compassion of St. Francis. It is our Lord there in the manger, surrounded by all of creation. Not named by category, not some abstraction, but each one with a personalized, intimate name, because what St. Francis knew is that we also can experience a direct experience of God there in the eyes of another person or a dog or a cat. (Yes, even a cat!) Or a bird or anything else that we find the ability to love.

Amen.