

A MATTER OF NAMES

A Sermon

(Scripture lesson: Ephesians 1:15-23)

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by

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Some of us have been talking together for the past few days about the nature of religious language; for religion is, among other things, language. It is the language of prayer, of liturgy, of songs, and of anthems; the Bible from which I was reading the lesson a few moments ago is language. At our house we read the Bible at dinnertime each night, and one of my young children recently remarked very sagely, "The Bible is just full of language." This sermon, which I am just beginning, again, is language; and I have often found myself in the midst of a sermon asking myself just what kind of language it is and what sort of language it is that goes on here. It seems to me a fair question, and one which, in its way, can help to illuminate both the nature of our religious experience and the nature of our human speaking.

This morning, however, I want to focus our attention upon just one element of language; namely, proper names. And I want to begin by telling you an experiment I performed recently on my five-year-old daughter. I asked her if she would mind changing her name. She stamped her foot indignantly, and replied, "My name has always been Ruth and always will be!" Her mother and I smiled, recalling that we had actually considered several other names before we had given her that one.

This simple episode illustrates two widely different attitudes toward names and indeed toward language, held by students of the subject. On the one hand, there's a large group of students and inquirers who tell us that a name is simply a conventional label which we paste on a person or on a thing. So parents are able to choose names for their children; or a man is even able to change his name, by appropriate legal procedures. This is true, we are told, not only of persons but of objects. New chemical elements, when they are discovered, are given names. In this connection, there's the old story about the lady at the astronomy lecture who asked how the scientists can possibly know the names of the stars. Well, this in general is the approach to names illustrated by the little girl's parents.

But there's another and a radically different view of this matter, represented by the little girl herself, who was, so to say, on the inside of the situation. She stamped her foot, and replied in indignation. Now evidently something of significance to her was at stake in all this. It was, I suggest, her whole sense of identity and meaning, as expressed in her own name. She could no more imagine herself with another name than she could give up her own sense of being herself.

Now, at a somewhat different level of intellectual sophistication, there is a large group of students of language today who are pointing out to us the significance of just this sense of personal identity and meaning. Actually, I think there is much of value in both approaches to names and to language; but this morning I want to focus attention on this second approach.

We find here the whole issue of personal, or if you will of existential meaning: the meaning of our human life, not viewed from the grandstands of detached observation, but from the actual playing fields of human action. It is easy, and it is altogether proper at times, to sit in a comfortable classroom or study, and to reflect in uncommitted detachment and objectivity on matters such as this; but outside the classroom, in the arena of action, we take another and a different view of all our human concerns. We ask with a poignancy and an urgency which cannot be denied, "Who am I? And whence do I come, and whither do I go and why am I here?" And in fact the very course of our lives is a statement in deed and in life to answer these questions. It's a kind of question which finds expression also in our names.

The history of religions provides us with many illustrations of this attitude. For example, in the ancient Near Eastern world out of which the Bible came a person's name often included the name of the God he served; and that wasn't just literary convention, but rather a literal expression of the supposed identity between a man and his God. In this same world, there were political struggles in which the king was overthrown, and in which his victorious enemies proceeded literally to blot out his name, to efface it from all the records. Then when the rebel in his turn was overthrown, his name in turn was expunged from the records. So you see, when the Bible speaks of a man's name being blotted out or destroyed, it is not speaking hyperbole but literal fact. For, in this ancient view, a man's name was somehow also an expression of his power, of his own personal essence, of his spirit or soul. At an even more primitive level, the magician who, by incantation or spell, seeks to do you harm, or perchance to do you good, weaves your name into his magic pattern of words; for he believes that if he has your name he has power over you. He has hold of the essence of you, of your soul. There's a somewhat similar view of names in the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis. After God has finished creating the animals, he brings them all before Adam so that Adam can name them. As a child, when I read that story I used to wonder how Adam knew what names to give them all.

Now, perhaps you're saying to yourself, "This is all sheer primitive superstition." And you have a point. There's a good deal of word magic and name magic in the history of religion; and let's say it bluntly and frankly: there are many instances of it in the Bible and in the history of Christianity. And yet, I should suppose that, in mid-Twentieth century, on the campus of a great modern university, it is hardly necessary to disavow attitudes such as these. However, mixed with the dross of magic and superstition, there's another attitude, about which we will do well not to be so lofty and so scornful. Let us call this other element a strong sense of personal identity and meaning, and a personal or face-to-face communication with other human selves. And I suppose the gist of what I have to say to you this morning is that there's a truth here, which we can separate out

from the magic and the superstition, and which we can lay hold upon as a valuable element of our moral and religious life. This element again is precisely the sense of personal identity and meaning.

Now, students of the Bible have for some time been reflecting upon these matters; and prominent among them has been the famous Jewish philosopher-theologian Martin Buber, who has written widely of "I-Thou," or person-person relations as he has found them in his own Jewish tradition, informed and guided as it is by Biblical images and Biblical faith. Now, according to Buber, an I-thou, or a person-person relation, is very different from an I-it, or a person-thing relation. This latter kind of relation, I sustain to the pulpit, which holds my notes, or to the watch with which I am timing my sermon, or to this microphone which hangs around my neck. They're all objects which I can use, as means to my ends. But how profoundly different is my relation to any of you, even in a group as large as this; for if I seek to treat you as things you resist, and properly so. For example, if you even suspected me of seeking to manipulate your minds, rather than appealing to you through rational persuasion, you would resist; at least I hope you would. In other words, I must respect and affirm your personality: your nature as persons.

Now, it is this relation of person to person that one's own identity is to be found within. As Buber has eloquently put the matter, I become I in relation to thou. I discover my own identity in what Buber has called the life of dialogue. Now, we do not have to read very far in the Bible to see these elements of which we're speaking. As Buber has put it, the Bible is a deeply dialogical book. Its characters are I's in the presence of thous. Many of the Bible's most expressive images are attempts to catch this personality of man. So the Bible speaks of a man's face, of his presence, and of his name. Thus, for example, God tells Abraham that in his name will all the families of the earth be blessed. And so the New Testament Christian approached God in the Name of Christ. And so the men of the Bible sought to preserve their names; and they feared lest their names would be blotted from off the face of the earth. The Bible takes the name of God very seriously. We all recall that famous passage in the Book of Exodus in which God -- in which Moses asks God for his name. Later in Biblical history the divine name became so very sacred that human lips did not dare to utter it. And so devout Jews use synonyms or paraphrases, like The Most High, or The Almighty. And to this day, when the name of God, Jehovah or Yahweh, is mentioned, in the text, devout Jews verbalize it as Adonai, My Lord. Indeed, I've had many exam papers in religion from devout Jewish students in which they have sought to express the name of deity as G_D. Last year I received such a paper in which was this rather mixed-up statement: The student said, "I have come to disbelieve in the existence of G_D."

Now, we miss the point of all this if we regard these as the subjects of ancient history and ancient scripture and not of present reality. For they are present reality. For instance, as I worked out this sermon, my senior-high-school son brought home the proofs of his yearbook pictures, pondering them with all the anxious con-

cern of adolescence. I engaged him in conversation, and I saw in those rather mediocre photos a person's whole self-image: his sense of personal meaning and relation to the community of his peers. Again, a friend from your faculty sent me a clipping not so long ago from your university newspaper, of a student here at Duke who stood in line to receive bids from fraternities; and who, when he came to the head of the line, could not recall his own name. The story was reported as uproariously comic, and yet I propose it does not take more than a second glance to see how serious it may well have been to the person involved. As I read it, my own mind went back to a time thirty years ago, when I stood in a similar line and found no bids in my envelope; and I felt the despair that clutched at my throat at that time.

Now it's of course easy enough to say from a secure, adult perspective, "How silly can a person be? How juvenile!" But the point is, I didn't and couldn't say it then, any more than the other student could remember his own name. Well, the conclusion is that personal identity and meaning are not things easily and once-for-all come by; not automatically given us at birth. Rather, they're matters for life-long struggle and achievement. It's not easy to be a person, and to sustain and maintain one's "personhood" against all the forces that threaten it. To be a person; to achieve and maintain one's humanity, is a matter of courage; as Paul Tillich put it, of the courage to be. Or, as Christian faith has traditionally put the same sentiment, a matter of faith, or conviction. And conversely, how much of traditional faith has properly been concerned with sustaining and renewing meaningful human self-hood, and identity.

There's another issue of selfhood involved in names, which is illustrated in Thomas Mann's book, Felix Krull, Confidence Man. In a very long passage in that book, a long passage so typical of the author, Felix Krull expresses self-disgust and self-loathing at his name which, by the dubious course of his life he has brought into such bad repute. His name is hateful to him, and he would like to be rid of it. He would like to find refuge in anonymity, or in some other name. Well, call this attitude self-loathing, call it, as other authors do, nausea, or self-alienation; or call it by its traditional Christian name of sin; the personal substance or reality involved is the same.

Well then, not only faith but sin finds expression in relation to one's name. Indeed, I think all the significant moments or aspects of personal life or destiny find expression here. In addition to faith and sin, there is the problem of God. I've been speaking rather equivocally about meaning and meaningful life. Now the whole conviction that life has meaning and is not meaningless is an important part of what our Christian tradition has meant by God, and faith in God. So let us turn briefly, then, from the name of man to the name of God. It's an important theme in the Bible. Man, the Bible assumes, stands in an I-thou relation to God. God is, according to the Bible, an I, and not an it. He

is personal; we can speak to him in prayer, and we can hear him speak to us. He has a name, according to the Bible.

Now I think there's a very important issue here, but I also think it's one of the most misunderstood in the whole field of religion; misunderstood by adherent and critic alike. For example, I know people and I've read books which put the question, "Is God personal?" meaning by it, "Is there some head man, or head spirit, somewhere just beyond the furthest telescope, whose darlings, whose favorites, we human beings are?" Now to this question the religious adherent answers, "Yes;" and the critic, the unbeliever, answers, "No." And so the argument is joined. I think they both radically misunderstand the nature of the personal relation between man and God; for they think of it, as Reinhold Niebuhr has acidly remarked, as man's right to lobby for special favors in the courts of the Almighty. And that seems to me not only intellectually unjustified but religiously repugnant.

To think of God as personal seems to me to mean something radically different from this. We take person-person relations toward each other, as it were, on a horizontal level. And so we discover their meaning and we discover the meaning of our lives in these terms. But then, in vertical relation, we face the problem of our attitude toward the Almighty, toward ultimate reality; as indeed all men have faced this problem; and no men have ever avoided it. Now the heart of faith in God, I believe, is to take toward ultimate reality, toward the Almighty, a faith as this question is with mystery, involved with so much that is forever past our human finding-out; to take toward the Almighty just this attitude of personal faith or trust. Such an attitude is the essence of what our fathers would have called "faith in God." If we read our Bibles with sensitivity and perception, we will see just this relation expressed in the Bible's reference to the name of God and to the name of Christ. The New Testament Christians greeted and blessed each other in this name; and, what is more important, they approached God in the name of Christ. And this expressed for them the attitude of personal trust and conviction and faith in ultimate reality. It is this meaning which comes through to me in the Ephesians passage which I read as our Scripture this morning. It speaks, you recall, of the immeasurable greatness of the divine power, which has raised Christ from the dead; which has made Him to sit at his right hand in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority, and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in that which is to come.

Let us pray.

O thou eternal Spirit, in whom we live and move and have our being, we commit our selves unto thee, in faith and in trust, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.