

2 Pentecost A
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I found myself in the midst of a really sad conversation the other day. I don't think it's overstating things to say that I was about two steps removed from a tragedy. A friend and colleague called me, quite distraught, because a young couple in her care had given birth to a baby who was stillborn. It was a young couple, and it was their first child. My friend was, naturally, grieved and wanted to talk about it with a friendly colleague while she was caring for the devastated couple. We had about four phone conversations where I hope I was able to offer some support. Even though I had never met this couple, as I heard more of the story—of their hopes and dreams for the child—the more invested and grieved I became. At one point I cried a little. And I found it so strange because, again, this poor couple are strangers to me.

In the first days of conversations, the couple had not given their child a name. So, my friend and I kept referring to the “baby” or the “child” or even sometimes “it.” As the absolute horror of the event continued to wash over me, I was surprised at how limited our language was to even talk about something so profoundly rare and sad. As with anything real or hard or tragic, sometimes the only thing to do is to bear witness and to stay on the other end of the phone.

A few days after the death, the couple let us know that the little baby had a name—Hazel Virginia. And when that little child was named, I noticed that something changed in how I was able to talk about her. I noticed that I was associating a name with a soul. I noticed that my friend and I could talk and could grieve about the death more fluently because we had a name to use to describe the little soul who didn't get much of a chance here on this earth.

I read a lot of news, and there are a few names that have been in the headlines the last few years. You might remember a few: Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile. In each of these cases, someone with little power or influence in our society was robbed of their life for being in the wrong place, for being the wrong skin color, for being too poor, or for having the terrible luck not to be born anywhere near the levers of power. In each of these instances, a large protest movement followed the death, and I heard the protesters chanting over and over, “Say Her Name.” “Say His Name.”

Why? Why would making the world say the same of a victim of injustice do anything? How will that change one iota of corruption in a society that is dangerous for the poor? How will knowing the name of a little baby who never had even one day to spend on this earth change how we think about her or grieve the life she never got to have?

I think it's primal. I think it's instinctual. We know somehow that the name is the absolute map to the soul. Or put another way, we know that the name makes us absolutely resistant to objectification. To paraphrase one of my favorite authors Terry Pratchett, every evil that has ever been perpetrated in this world has begun with treating people as things. Every one. The moment a person is a number or a dollar or an object, all kinds of evil arrives.

So to name someone is to resist objectification. Michael, Freddie, Sandra, Philando, Hazel. Say their names.

Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Simon and Judas. The author of the Gospel of Matthew wants us to know the names of the disciples. Not generic disciples, but people with names, family connections, and hometowns. The Gospel wants us to see the souls of these people, to see ourselves in the work and ministry. We are supposed to be looking at real people, with real lives and real names—not abstractions, not objects.

This Gospel reminds us that we are named and sent into the world to heal and cast out demons. And those demons will try to convince us of all kinds of nonsense, but we who are called by God know better. We know that evil begins when people are things, and we know that our God is the kind of God who can count the number of hairs on our heads and who holds our names in God's own unending love.

Even when you are feeling cast adrift on turbulent seas—the news, personal transitions, family fights, money problems, illness, anxiety—whatever the devil of the particular day is—even on those days, you are named by God. You are known with absolute specificity. Your soul is beloved by the divine creator of all things, and you are never, ever, an object or a thing.

Sin though is real. Even in the body of Christ. Even in this place of healing and beauty, we Christians can forget what we know. We can treat people as things. We can forget that everyone we see is a child of God with hopes and dreams. We can turn blind eyes to the very real danger that so many of our brothers and sisters in this world live in. We can forget that the person in the headline is known by name by the same God who knows us. And that God in God's infinite mercy weeps when we forget what we are supposed to know.

Jesus called the disciples by name. We are baptized by name. There are no generic souls. There are no disposable souls. If you remember nothing else from your entire Christian education, remember this: you are named and made in the very image of God. But so too is your enemy. So too is the person chewed up and spit out by society. So too are the grieving parents and the little girl gone too soon. And so too were the disciples—named and sent to bring healing into the world. Remember that you are named disciples and that you are called by God. Then leave this church and remind the world that everyone else is too. Amen.