***NAME-CALLING***

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Text: Acts 9:1-22

Some of you may recall the classic sitcom *Cheers* that first aired in the 1980s and early ‘90s and its iconic theme song that included this much remembered line: “You want to go where everybody knows your name.”[[1]](#endnote-1) That line came to mind in reading Luke’s account of Saul’s Damascus Road experience, because for Saul, that place where everybody knew his name was not just some neighborhood pub, but everywhere he went! His reputation as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus was legendary. Luke recalls him standing on the sidelines with the coats of witnesses at his feet as Stephen was stoned to death for his faith in the risen Christ. “Saul approved of their killing him,” writes Luke. Saul approved of the arrest, killing, and persecution of a host of Jesus’ followers in and around Jerusalem, leading Luke to describe him as “*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*.” He was Darth Vader before there was Darth Vader! So when Saul asked the high priest for letters granting him authority to carry his vengeful tour to Damascus, they were readily granted. Who better to persecute the followers of the Way in Damascus than Saul, who had proven himself so capable and zealous in Jerusalem!

In Damascus too everyone knew Saul’s name, and Saul reveled in his reputation as a persecutor par excellence. But among those who knew his name was One who Saul did not expect. When Saul was suddenly blinded by the light on the Damascus Road, the first words spoken to him were his name: “*Saul, Saul*,” and then, “*why do you persecute me?*” The One speaking knew Saul’s name, but Saul did not know to whom the voice belonged, so he asked, “*Who are you, Lord?”* – the Lord being perhaps no more than a sign of Saul’s recognition that he was in the presence of One greater than himself. “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*,” said the voice. And I can’t help but wonder if Saul’s first reaction was something akin to “Oh – no!”

I am sure there are those who would have liked to see Jesus take his revenge upon Saul right there and then in the road – perhaps striking him blind permanently or making him a leper or sending him to some awful foreign prison to contemplate his sins – but Jesus’ message was never one of revenge or retribution, but one of love and forgiveness. Unlike many of his self-proclaimed followers then and now, Jesus practiced what he preached. He saw in Saul something more than just the persecutor of Christians; he saw someone who might be transformed and become vital to sharing the Good News!

Ananias had a role in that conversion experience of Saul. When the Lord spoke to him, the Lord called him by name too, “*Ananias,*” to which Ananias obediently responded, “*Here I am, Lord*.” Unlike Saul who must have dreaded hearing his name called on the Damascus Road by the risen Jesus, Ananias knew who was calling him and stood ready to respond – at least until he heard what the Lord had in mind – going to lay hands on Saul. Then he hesitated, and even pushed back a bit, saying: “*Lord, I have heard about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.*” In other words, “Lord, you know this is a really bad guy who could arrest me or worse for doing what you ask!” Ananias doesn’t openly defy God, but he does try to persuade God that this is not a particularly good idea that has popped into the divine head. For, Ananias sees only Saul the Persecutor, not Paul the saint; he sees only what has been, not what may yet be. Yet, when God confirms his call to Ananias to go to Saul, he goes. And because he goes and lays hands on Saul as God asks, Saul’s eyes are opened and his conversion completed, and Saul the persecutor of Jesus’ followers becomes one of those baptized followers of the risen Lord.

Jesus knew their names – *Saul, Ananias* – and he knows your name too. Do not think that because 2,000 years have passed and the world’s population has exploded that you are any less known by God. As the Lord says through the prophet Isaiah:

*You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you…*

*Do not fear for I am with you*.

We are known and loved by God – known by name – and I wonder: if you heard your name called by a divine voice on Coalter Street or Richmond Road or in your own living room, would your response be “Oh – no!” like Saul, or would it be “Here I am, Lord!” like Ananias? Before you answer that question, you might consider whether you, like Saul, are persecuting Jesus.

Saul was not one of those who put Jesus to death on the cross. He had no role in Jesus’ arrest, trial, or crucifixion. He didn’t persecute Jesus directly; he was persecuting the followers of Jesus, yet the risen Jesus called that vengeful work persecution of him: “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute* ***me****?*” The same Jesus who said, “*Just as you have done it to the least of these, so you have done to me*” implies “*Just as you have persecuted any of my followers so you have persecuted me.*” In other words, how we treat the last and the least and the followers of Jesus is how we treat him; if we persecute them, we persecute him. We can hardly call him, “Lord,” and proclaim ourselves his disciples, if we then fail him by failing them and persecute him by persecuting them.

“I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; in fact you supported cutting off aid that fed me,” says Jesus. I was a refugee, and you did not welcome me, but sent me to a foreign prison. I was sick and not only did you fail to visit me, you denied me health care. I was in prison, and not only did you forget about me, you did nothing to assure that I was treated humanely there. Do not think that because we are not directly involved in persecuting Jesus or our neighbors, we are not held accountable. As with Saul, Jesus knows our names, knows what we have done and what we have failed to do – for him and for our neighbors. We have the gospels and the letters of Paul and the example of faithful saints across 2,000 years, so it should not take a Damascus Road experience for us to change our ways and embrace Jesus’ way of living in love. It shouldn’t, but will it?

It is not always an easy path. Saul went from feared persecutor respected by the chief priests to persecuted apostle of Jesus Christ. To be faithful is not always to be popular or with the “in crowd” or to be one whose name everyone knows. Too often Christians have compromised their faith to support popular political postures or nationalistic aims. We are called to be better than that, to be more faithful than that. Faithfulness means following One who knows your name in life and in death, One who calls you to love him by loving your neighbors near and far, day by day, every day. And despite our previous unfaithfulness, God has not given up on us. If Saul could be redeemed, then so can we. God can see in us the possibility for faithfulness, gifts that can be used to build up the Kingdom of God and share the hope-filled news of Jesus’ resurrection with a world desperately in search of hope.

Not everyone will have a shining moment when we are changed from persecutor of Christ to herald of the gospel. Some of us will be more Ananias than Saul, nurtured in faith instead of blinded by the light. What will it take for you? When God calls your name, and God will call, will you say, “Oh – no!” or perhaps instead, “Here I am, Lord! Send me!” Amen

1. “Where Everybody Knows Your Name”, Song by Gary Portnoy [↑](#endnote-ref-1)