

There’s something about hearing your name, spoken by someone you respect, admire, or even love. It sends the message that they know who you are—or said another way, they value you enough to remember your name. Of course, the opposite is also true. If someone keeps messing up your name, it puts you in an awkward position, doesn’t it? How long do you let it slide? Or do you just accept being known incorrectly?

I bring this up because, in today’s Gospel lesson, Matthew shares a list of the names of the twelve disciples (whom he now calls apostles). That’s not unusual, really, but it begs the question, why did it take almost ten chapters to get this list? Part of the answer, I suppose, is that the Gospel of Matthew—and the whole Bible—is, above all, about Jesus. He is the focus, He is the key, He is what it’s all about, and everything else is secondary. At the same time, Matthew’s gospel is at least *partially* about the disciples, since they have been called by Jesus. They are given authority from Him and sent to be His representatives. Or, think of it this way: *they are valued enough to be called by name, in the most important document ever written.*

We are even told a few of the names of the larger group of His first disciples. Here we could name Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. But we don’t know them all. For every Peter, James and John, there are thousands upon thousands of Christian disciples whose names are now forgotten, but who blessed the world in Jesus’ name. Though each one of us knows only a few of the billions of people in the world today, still, certain things can be said about all of us.

Each person has a unique identity, a personal place in a family tree, diverse intelligence and abilities, interests and opportunities, limitations and needs—and names! For all our differences, at least three things can be said about each and every human being. First, we are all the handiwork of the God who gives life in the first place. Second, we are all sinners, separated from God because of our inherited nature. Third, all together, we make up "the world" which we are told with authority, God so loved that He sent His only Son, "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

It would take a perfect sacrifice for the sin of the whole world to free the whole world from its bondage to death—the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God, and that happened. It happened the day Jesus was crucified. But because this deliverance from sin, death and the devil is to be apprehended, or received by individual faith, this Good News of salvation needs to be communicated, preached, proclaimed, heard and believed by individuals. It was because of the enormity of this task that Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Luke 10:1-3).

What were these laborers to do? They were to labor by living out and proclaiming the reality of Jesus. He told them, "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" that is, it has come to you today. It’s an arm’s length away, no farther. The kingdom of heaven,

the kingdom of God, is where Jesus rules in love and compassion. It comes to you when you hear it—breaking through the harassment and helplessness of life. It comes to us in the midst of our distress: the unprecedented conflicts between nations, the dissolution of marriage and the family, and conflicts and scandals that contribute to our feelings of cynicism and even fear. Add to that our private tragedies—the death of a loved one, our addictions, hopelessness, or loneliness. The news of a spiritual reality in which Jesus brings mercy, forgiveness, and compassion is meant for each and every person, coming from the God who created you and formed you, and who now says to you, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are Mine" (Isaiah 43:1).

That's why in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism the pastor asks, "And how is this child to be named," or "How are you named?" For, when the time was right, Jesus told His followers to make disciples by "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In baptism, your name is brought together with God's Name, and you become His child, known and cherished. In baptism, you join Jesus in the water, and your Heavenly Father says to both of you, "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."

Have you taken that to heart?

Almighty God, You have sent Your only Son to reveal Your compassion and saving love to all people, and through Him have invited us to call you "Father." Amid the changes and chances of life in an increasingly impersonal world, make us to know and believe, by Your grace, You know our names, and have written them in Your Book of Life. For the sake of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.