

Holy Name  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Rev. Paul Moore

## **Naming and Being Named**

When I was growing up in Ecuador, I found that my name was not easy for Ecuadorians to pronounce or spell. Paul became "Pa-ul," a source of great irritation to me, because "Pablo" was a familiar name. "Moore" when there are no silent vowels in Spanish, was especially troublesome. However, "Mora" was a common last name. I took to calling myself "Pablo Mora." It wasn't my name—but it was pronounceable. My parents did similarly before me. My father, Bruce, became Roberto, and my mother, Joyce, became Josefina.

Other interesting things happen with names. For a long time, my wife's paternal grandfather kept mum about his ancestry. His last name, "Cone," was suspected of being an anglicized version of "Cohen," as a cover for being Jewish. What finally emerged was quite surprising. He was Irish, and Cone was the original form of his last name. No cover intended!

All of that supposes that names are like sticky-notes. A sticky-note calls attention to the fact that something is there. It may or may not actually tell you what is there or why it might be important. Names have not always been like that. In biblical times, names were more like labels. They told you something about what was inside. For the ancient Hebrews, pronouncing the name of God, "YHWH" was taboo. No name could actually point to what God is, no human word is an accurate label. The name of God was a finger pointing toward a mystery.

This is the wonder of the name Jesus. It is a human name, common in Judah at the time of Jesus and among many peoples today. In good Jewish fashion, it is more than a sticky-note, it is a label. "Jesus" is a variant of "Joshua," or more accurately in the Hebrew, "Yehoshua," meaning God saves. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Joseph is considering what to do with a pregnant fiancée, Gabriel appears to him and tells him to marry her anyway and name the child Jesus, "For he will save his people from their sins." There are lots of examples of this kind of thing throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, making a person's name an integral part of the story. Jesus has this Jewish name in the Jewish tradition, and his name is part of the story.

However, we hold that Jesus is more than just a human person. The title, "Immanuel," from Isaiah 7, meaning "God with us," describes the other dimension of this person, Jesus. Jesus is also God—but you can't name God, right? Then again, we can, in the person of Jesus. "Jesus" invokes the presence of God in human form, at once God present and humanity at its fullest. If Jesus holds God and humanity together, then somehow, we share the mysterious name of God. The name "Jesus" calls us into

community with God and one another, as it calls each of us into the fullness of our own humanity.

What does that mean, to be bearers of the name of God? Sharing the name of God names the inner heart of our own being, calling us into our own fullest humanity. I always admire people who remember names. It's work for me, and I'm always embarrassed when I can't think of someone's name. It is especially embarrassing because I have been called by the wrong name before. There's something unsettling about it, as if I haven't really been seen; like lovers being close when one of them speaks the name of a third person! Of course, when a sales person uses my name 4 times in the first sentence spoken to me it feels a bit manipulative as well. I am not being seen. The potential sale is all that is in focus, and it feels like false intimacy. When someone names you genuinely, it is deeply healing. It builds bridges between hearts. It validates and includes. When you are genuinely named, you can genuinely live into who you are with that person.

Imagine, then, the idea that the God of the universe, the source and foundation of all that exists, might name you in your innermost being. The one whose love for you is so great that death itself was endured for you, speaks your real name. God whispers in your heart,

*Beloved Paul.*

*Beloved Tomas.*

*Beloved James.*

*Beloved Beth.*

*Beloved Ann.*

*Beloved..... you fill in your own name.*

Validation comes from deep within, independent of people from outside you. You are beloved by the God of love. The love God holds you in is the love that is God's own name. If this is what God thinks of you, it gives you a solid rock on which to stand. All slights, all abuse, all injustice, all attempts to make you the victim do not name you. God names you: Beloved one, sharer of my love.

Sharing the name of God names the best and fullest intention of human society, calling us to the vision of the Beloved Community. If we are the community of the beloved, how then shall we live with one another? The love we have known becomes the love we share. Each and every one becomes a beloved one. If each and every one is named by God in their innermost being as beloved, then justice is more than a cause around which we focus our righteous indignation (which in my experience is rarely real indignation and more rarely righteous.) It is a way in which we affirm who God has said we are.

When Harvard professor Cornel West points out to us that 12% of the illegal drugs used in this country are used by African Americans, but 70% of the convictions are against African Americans, we know that some are not being recognized as beloved of God. In the name of love, we stand up and speak out. When we know that the prison recidivism

rate is over 50% in the first year after release, and we know that programs to help people released from prison are a huge factor in reducing that number, and when we have the opportunity to assist a prisoner in the re-entry process, then we see in that person the beloved name of God, and we step up to the plate.

Justice born of love calls us to a new and ancient humanity—what we were always intended to be, and yet still a new and challenging idea.

Sharing the name of God names creation at its most holy as the self-expression of YHWH, calling us into harmony, justice and peace. In her book, *Halo of the Sun*,<sup>1</sup> Noël Bennett, an Anglo woman, speaks of her experience of learning to weave in the Navajo tradition. As can be expected, it's not merely a way to make a rug, or even to earn a living. Weaving enacts stories of how the world began, and how the Creator weaves existence into being.

She speaks of being in the hospital with one of her friends as her friend gave birth. The Navajo medicine man took a ball of yarn and entwined it in a long crochet chain, and then, chanting, unwove it, releasing any knots that might be in the woman that would hinder the flow of the process of new birth. The knots could be in her mind, her body, her relationships, her environment, anywhere in her. Giving birth is a process of releasing into beauty.

There are peoples along the northwestern seaboard that lived for millennia in community with ocean tides, seasons and the world around them. There is a legend among the Samish about the woman who married the sea. It is a beautiful account, reflecting the relationship the Samish had with the sea, of mutual dependence and self-giving love. Unfortunately, "Westerners" took control and largely ignored that relationship, substituting it for another way of that makes the created world a commodity to be bought and sold rather than a community in which to live. Now our lifestyle consumes 30% of the world's resources when we make up 1% of the world's population. We are out of balance, out of harmony, and I fear we are capable of consuming the land right out from under our feet.

Yet, those peoples are still around us. We stand on land once belonging to the Upper Skagit people, who now hold a reservation east of Sedro Woolley. What wisdom might they share with us about how to live in harmony with the world around us? How might we be able to work together to heal the land? I believe we need to find out. If all of creation is God's self-expression in love, then the world is not a commodity to be bought and sold, but a precious context in which to learn the full extent of what it means to bear the name of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, Noël. *Halo of the Sun: Stories Told and Retold*. Northland Publishing, 1987.

And they called him "Jesus." And Jesus shares the name of God with us, and calls us, "Beloved."