

Anonymous

Job 38 & 42 selections; Philippians 2:1-11
Squaw Valley Chapel, United Church of Christ
Olympic Valley CA
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If you and I want to make a name for ourselves how do we go about doing it? Is “making a name” something to be desired?

In 1932, when Waverly Root was editor of the Paris Edition of the *International Herald Tribune*, he received an anonymous letter-to-the-editor which began: “It is an undisputed fact that the influence of Gertrude Stein upon young writers today has been the most vital force in American letters.”

Not particularly agreeing with this opinion, Root did some checking and discovered that the unnamed author of the letter was none other than Gertrude Stein herself – *The Paris Edition: The Autobiography of W. R.: 1927-1934*, pg. 42

If we go about making a name for ourselves that is bigger than our abilities, it would have been better to remain anonymous.

“Anonymous” can be a scoundrel. Most ministers I know have had dealings with “Anonymous”. He/she has sent us letters, either to revile our existence or to trash that of others.

The Rev. Leslie Weatherhead was once using his sermon time to answer written questions handed up by members of the congregation. Having read to himself one of the 3x5 cards he felt compelled to comment upon it:

Well, well! I’ve received many anonymous letters in my life, which have a message but no signature. This is the first time I have received one that has a signature and no message. This card simply reads, “Fool!” – *Leslie Weatherhead: A Personal Portrait*, pg. 203 – Note: the same story was told of Henry Ward Beecher in *American Literary Anecdotes*, pg., 20.

“Anonymous” will tell us what we must do without any danger of our asking that he/she help out in doing it.

The Rev. Roland Hill used to arrive at his chapel in a carriage – a method of transportation popular in his day. He received an anonymous letter rebuking him for this, “This was not the way your master traveled.” Rev. Hill read the letter from the pulpit, and said that it was quite true, and that if the writer would come to the vestry with a saddle and a bridle he, Rev. Hill, would ride him home. W. M. Bull, *The Saints and My Own Life*, pg. 18.

Basic, seminary training teaches the want to- be minister that you never, ever act on the advice of “Anonymous.”

But “Anonymous” is also a hero. I mentioned in last week’s sermon one of the ways in which I have been blessed by “Anonymous.” Someone, not wishing his name to be known and using the intermediary services of the Rev. Dr. Moss a local Episcopal Minister, paid for the first semester of my college education. And other blessings abound. One of the great joys of worship – for me - is to be able to sing aloud of God’s love. So many of the hymns – the words or the score come to us from “Anonymous”. This week, eating out at Sunnyside restaurant, I realized that “Anonymous” had picked

the head of lettuce that an anonymous salad chef had converted into an entrée salad that was not only good for me but delicious.

“Anonymous” can be a scoundrel. “Anonymous” can be our hero as well. But how does anonymity rate with God?

For the most part I believe God is a fan of remaining nameless. When Moses wanted a name.... a name he could drop with the Israelites that might lend some credibility to his request that they follow him out of Egypt, he asked the anonymous voice speaking to him out of a burning bush.... “Who shall I say sent me?” And God answered “Tell them “I am who I am” sent you.

In the Jewish tradition today there is a reluctance to speak or write the name of God. It is too holy, anonymity is preferred.

Rabbi Silberman, onetime teacher at Vanderbilt, never used the word *God* in his classroom. Rather he spoke of “The Holy One,” or, his favorite, “The Place.” –*Craddock Stories*, pg. 86. If God is the Place... everything where we are... then God remains anonymous for how can we step back and see who God is!

Anonymity was a fond dream of Jesus. Time and time again, having been goaded by compassion to heal another person he would then ask that the person to go home quietly, their lips sealed as to how they were now able to see or walk or speak. Sadly, very few of them did just that, and crowds began to build wherever Jesus went. With the crowds came the false expectations, the diversion from his primary purpose, the autograph hunters, and the paparazzi... all of which had their own 1st Century, Holy Land equivalent.

Jesus was horrified whenever one of his disciples put him on a pedestal... “No, no... Not me but the Father who sent me!” I believe Jesus would be appalled today to know that there are people who pray, not to God but to Jesus. “No, no, no! ... Not me but your Father who sent me!”

Jesus, although he could claim extraordinary powers, did not consider equality with God as something to be desired; rather he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant. And in Jesus’ mind, and the mind of Paul, a servant was the epitome of “Anonymous.”

The person who wants his or her name to be “out there;” to be as recognizable as a Kardashian – has to serve as many masters as there are people who could be useful. Those who accept as their prime designation the name “Child of God” serve God alone and do not crave self-aggrandizement. “Big Papi,” also known as David Ortiz, the designated hitter for the Boston Red Sox, spends countless hours in community service in his homeland of the Dominican Republic, Roxbury MA and other Boston neighborhoods, without inviting photographers to go with him. And on those ballfield occasions, when his very talented self stands out, as he crosses home plate after another blast over the Green Monster, he points both index fingers to the sky as if to say... “The glory belongs to God!” It could be just habit or a sham but I don’t think so. David Ortiz is at his best when the spotlight is on God,

For me, any desire to live anonymously begins with an assessment of God’s greatness...

When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, The moon and the stars that you have put in their places; who are we that you are mindful of us mere mortals that you care for us? –Psalm 8

Or, in the words of Job, read to us this morning: (42: 1-6)

“I have uttered what I did not understand; things too wonderful for me which I did not know. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you... I repent in dust and ashes.”

If all we have - by which to measure ourselves - is ourselves and others, then there is a name to be made. But if we hold ourselves up against the best we know of God then anonymity is wise.

Perhaps you too had to read the Odyssey somewhere in your education. I did in Greek class which forced close attention to the meaning of every word. Most memorable to me was Odysseus's encounter with Cyclops. You may remember Cyclops as being a huge, one-eyed man who threw stones at his enemies. It has been suggested that Cyclops was the author, Homer's, personification of a volcano spewing forth molten rock. When first they met Cyclops asked Odysseus his name and Odysseus answered "I am no-man." Later when battling with each other Odysseus poked out Cyclops' eye and the huge man began screaming in pain. His neighbors cried out to him, "Has someone hurt you?" Cyclops answered "No-Man has wounded me!" The neighbors turned back to their work.

Anonymity saved the adventurer just as surely as it can save many of us. We do what we do in the presence of God and are unable, by that presence, to vaunt ourselves above others, to make any name for ourselves more worthy than "No-man, servant of God."

The Rev. Robert Stephen Hawker, minister of Morwenstowe, England on the Atlantic coast erected provided a stone in the church graveyard for every sailor who washed up on the shore. Each of the stones bore the same inscription, "Not known... but known."

Not a single sparrow shall fall but our heavenly Father knows it. "Anonymous" can be a hero; anonymity can make our life... which I believe was Jesus' point.... Making a life in the name of God and not our own.

Amen.