

Nobel Laureate and theoretical physicist, Richard Feynman told this story:

“All the kids were playing in the field and one kid said to me, “See that bird. What kind of bird is that?” And I said, “I haven’t the slightest idea what kind of bird it is.” And he said, “It’s a brown-throated thrush. Your father didn’t teach you anything!”

*But it was the opposite. My father had taught me. Looking at the bird he said, “Do you know what that bird is? It’s a brown-throated thrush. But in Spanish it is **aftas de garganta marrón**, in Italian it is: **tordo dalla gola bruna**, in French it’s **grive à gorge brune**, and in Chinese its, **Zo Ho Huame neyow**. Now you know in all the languages what it is. But when you’re finished with all that, you’ll know absolutely nothing whatsoever about that bird. You’ll only know about humans from different places and what they call it. Now,” he said, “let’s look at the bird and what it’s doing.”*

*And then Feynman added, “You see, that is deep understanding. My father didn’t give me the name of the bird. He taught me **the difference between knowing the name of something, and knowing something**.*

As children we first communicate by naming. We name people: Mama and Dada, and then move on to naming things: bottle, blankie, shoe, kitty, and birdie. At first we know only names, but as we grow, we begin to attach meaning to the people and things around us. To a toddler Mama isn’t just the face looking back at them but is the one who comforts them when they cry. And a bottle isn’t just a thing, it’s the holder of milk that tastes good, makes hunger go away and leaves them feeling happy.

Throughout our lives, we learn the names of many things and many people. We become skilled at identifying types of flowers, cars, music and birds. And we come to know people by their names — some of us better than others—but usually well enough that we can call them by name when we see them at church or at the market. Knowing the names of people and things helps us to navigate our world. But if we never move beyond knowing just the names, we miss out on a rich opportunity.

This Sunday we celebrate the Holy Trinity as we honor and acknowledge our triune God — One God in three distinct persons, each themselves God, whom we worship in unity. As St. Patrick notes: they are the three-in-one, and the one-in-three, named most commonly: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But these are not the only names for God.

In the OT, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is called by many names:

God, Lord, El, Shaddai, Elohim, Adonai, Jehovah, Tzevoat, Yahweh, and I am that I am.

The God of the NT is also called by many names:

God (Theos) Lord (Kyrios) and Father (Abba and Pater);

Jesus, Immanuel, the Christ, Lord, the Word made Flesh, and the Son;

Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, the Paraclete, Advocate, Comforter, and Companion.

I found myself thinking about names and how they matter. To be named and to name is part of the human experience. We not only name our children, we also name our pets and cars. Names are passed down through history and generations, filled with meaning. They're not only an identifier, within them can be found the hopes, dreams, and possibilities of those who came before. Names can help us to differentiate ourselves from others, and give us a way to track the details of our lives — we carry them with us from birth to kindergarten, graduation to the workplace, into marriage and into death. And when others remember our name, when they say it correctly, or with intention, it matters.

As I reflected on Feynman's story, I found myself wondering: *What is the difference between being a person who knows God's name and being someone who knows something about God? What is it that lies beyond the name of God that is worth knowing, that we would want to know about?*

We know that God has many names. Certainly, each of us, if asked, could name God. But what name would we choose, and why? Our answers may differ from someone else's, or may change over time. The names for God that resonate with me lately are: Holy One, Lord Jesus, and Spirit of Life. I like them because they say a little something about each person of the Trinity

Yet to know someone's name doesn't mean that we, in fact, *know* someone or know about them. While the bird's name in the story, *Brown-Throated Thrush*, described the bird, the boy who knew the name knew nothing *about* the bird.

Similarly, while the naming of God as Father, Son or Holy Spirit may identify each person of the Trinity, it doesn't guarantee that a person knows anything about God. If you were asked, "Who is God?", what might be your answer? It seems that to know God or to know something about God, one must take steps to learn about God.

And this is what Nicodemus, a wise and educated religious leader, set out to do. He came to Jesus in the dark of the night. If anyone had asked him, “Who is this man?”, he would have said, “Jesus of Nazareth”, because he knew his name, and he sensed that Jesus was one who was Godly. Beyond the name, Nicodemus knew nothing of Jesus. So he came, asking questions, seeking to learn, but he struggled. Hearing each word of Christ’s literally, he found it impossible to surrender his disbelief; he could not, in that moment, allow for the possibility that what Jesus was telling him could actually be true.

Jesus told him of new life, of spiritual rebirth given by the Spirit, the one whose presence human beings sense but cannot command for like the wind, the Spirit blows where it will.

Although he seems to want to understand who Jesus is and all he is saying, Nicodemus, with all his credentials and self-professed wisdom, doesn’t get it. His own understanding of God and the world somehow keeps him from being able to hold what Jesus is saying as possible. And so, he is left asking the question we all ask, “How can these things be?”

Whether it is the person of the Holy Trinity, being born of the Spirit, the Resurrection or the Ascension — there is much about God, Jesus and the Spirit we struggle to make sense of, and that we simply do not, or maybe even cannot know. We each have our own ideas about who God is or isn’t, or what God really can or cannot do. It is into these wonderings and unknowns that Jesus speaks certainty, as he tells Nicodemus and us something about God.

“God so loved the world”, he said, “that he gave his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have everlasting life.” This is the character of our God — loving, sacrificial, intentional and generous. With these words, Jesus assures us that God is so much more than a name. God is the one we can trust, because he sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn it or to condemn us, but to save it, to love us. And it is God, whose Spirit dwells among us, who desires that rather than simply know God’s name, we might come to know something about God. Something that might save and restore us.

Maybe we, like Nicodemus, have sensed God’s presence. Maybe we have caught a glimpse of Jesus in others: in their being, in their words, or by their actions. And in those moments that we can’t explain, when we wonder, *how can these things be*, or how it is that we are able to experience, feel, and claim belief in God with certainty, but are unable to prove or explain it. Steeped in holy mystery, these are questions that may

never be answered to our satisfaction. Yet every day, God beckons us to come, to draw near, to boldly step beyond the name and to find there the Holy One in Three: God, Jesus and the Spirit, whose desire is to be known. Perhaps it is the Holy Spirit who is moving in and through our lives, bringing new life, new understanding, who is teaching us a little something about God?

It is in our noticing, in our paying attention and beholding with awe that which we cannot fully comprehend, that we begin to know something about God. St. Patrick expressed in his Breastplate, or Lorica (meaning body of armor) which we sang (will sing) this morning his knowing of God as protector, of the Spirit as guide, and of Christ as ever present, in every place and moment. Apart from his relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Patrick would have been someone with only a name for God. And so it is for us. Because we have relationship with the Holy Three-in-One, the invitation to know God is ever before us. We need only lean in.
