

Your True Name

By Leonard Marcel

Names in Scripture communicate an essential characteristic of a person. The names of people change as a result of their encounter with the Divine, demonstrating thereby that once we encounter God, we are no longer the same person. For example, Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul, With the new name come both a new identity and a responsibility. The new woman or man, changed as a result of an experience of God, is expected to conduct life in a different way.

The same is true for those who have been baptized and given a Christian name, and this has serious implications for how we are to live both individually and socially. In several other religions as well, one is given a new name upon initiation.

Your given name, however is only part of your name. There is also your family name, the name of your inheritance and genetic endowment. Some family names designate the occupation of our ancestors, For thousands of years, the surname was a name of specification and localization: Joseph of Arimathea, Mary of Nazareth, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena. Sometimes it was also an indication and designation of parentage; Simon bar (son of) Jonah. In the Arab world, this is still a common way of naming child. "ibn" means "son of ":Abdulla ibn Abdul Aziz. In northern European countries there are many remnants of this practice in names like Johnson (Johansson), Anderson, Smithson, Lavransdotter, Stefansdotter. As we go more deeply into contemplative practice, we become aware, intimately aware, of God's life as our life, of our life as the life of God, as a child of God. And in doing so we begin to realize that the family name we have been carrying these many years is not truly our family name, is not truly a designation of our inheritance and endowment. Contemplative practice over time writes upon the heart that one is truly, intimately a daughter, a son, of God and that your true family name is not _____, _____, _____ or _____, but Goddaughter, Godsson. This is at once joyful and terrifying.

Most of us live an intriguing spiritual irony. We say that we would give anything to have a deep experience of God. We practice contemplative prayer: we may do lectio divina. We may attend an occasional retreat or day of recollection, but more often than not, we stop, short of completely letting go and completely opening ourselves to a deep experience of that ultimate reality we call God.

In a recent newspaper column, Garrison Keillor of Lake Wobegone fame, wrote that the Bible is the most popular and least read book, "a perennial best seller thanks to our good intentions to attend to the Word and divine the Lord's Will, which one does for a few days until you realize that you already know the Lord's Will and you would prefer not to."

What gets in the way? Despite what we say, for many of us, we are actually afraid of such an experience and what it would entail, because it likely would move us out of our comfort zone and change our lives forever.

Abram did not hold back when he encountered God but opened himself completely to God's direction in his life. He listened to this strange God and his ready response even today these many centuries later leaves us in awe and admiration. In a patriarchal society to leave the place of the tribe, the place of the father, was virtually unthinkable. He left his tribe and culture and went to an unknown place where he was an outsider. He was changed forever by his response to God and we, as his descendants, can only be grateful for it. Can we, would we, do likewise?

The Book of Exodus reminds us that God is powerfully transcendent and holy, beyond our understanding or imagining. As contemplatives, we also know from our practice that God is intimately immanent, closer to us than our own heartbeat. As bearers of the divine name, we are also to be holy and to bear witness to the everpresent life of God by the way we live. The Old Testament prophets emphasized repeatedly loving fidelity to God and to the meaning of what it is to be God's children in concrete action. Yeshua (Jesus) is also clear about this in Matthew's Gospel when he says that his true mother and brothers and sisters are those who live the will of God (Mt 12:46-50). Father Thomas Keating said once in an interview that "Christ called us...not just so that we will accept him as Savior but also that we will follow the same process which brought him to his final stage of consciousness." In other words, we are called, each of us is called, to recognize and experience our true identity and to follow the same contemplative path which brought Yeshua (Jesus) to his own awareness and experience of his true identity. He moved beyond all subject-object dualism so that both his soul and the personal Father-God were dissolved in the void he entered through his Great Kenosis.

Almost always we must leave a place of comfort, sometimes physical but more often spiritual and psychological, in order to grow and to discover our true identity. To be aware of one's identity as a child of God is to be aware of a radical call to change. Beginning with the Sermon on the Mount and for the remainder of his ministry Yeshua [Jesus] tells us about our identity and calls us to a life of change - metanoia - which takes the form of opening to love and compassion.

Contemplatives who have deeply experienced their identity as daughters and sons of God are people who, in the midst of the madding crowd, the din of the throng, find silence of soul in an indelible awareness of God's presence. It is in the midst of their daily contact with fellow human beings, with their work and occupations, with their strivings and aspirations, that they encounter the Anointed One of creation. We truly live our heritage as daughters and sons of God by how we treat others - caring for the sick, ministering to the imprisoned, feeding the hungry, forgiving one another in our hearts, loving our enemies, thirsting for justice, showing kindness and compassion and, above all, persevering in the exact fulfillment of the requirements of each moment. All of that work - humble, small, monotonous - is prayer expressed in action. It is we ordinary people, walking in the streets of our neighborhoods, whom God calls to be apostles and saints in the very midst of our home lives and work lives. It is there, as well as on the cushion, that God awaits us with the infinite and unconditional love of a Father.

Contemplative practice ultimately opens us to this infinite and unconditional love and compassion of God, enables us to embody them and to bring them to others. Toward the end of his life, Thomas Merton said, "O God, we are one with you. You have taught us that, if we are open to one another, you dwell with us... and love and compassion have prevailed." Love and compassion renounce power and embrace service. They seek peace over dominance, unity over

discord, giving over receiving, They seek a profound holiness and see the other as brother and sister. They find the divine image in the least of creatures and the life of God saturating all creation. Our practice and awareness of our true name open to us all of this. A daughter or son of God quite naturally and unselfconsciously, in the words of St. Paul (1 Thes 5:17), rejoices always, prays constantly and gives thanks in all things. And the prayer in the heart of such a one in every breath moment of every day is simply "Thy will be done."

We belong to God. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God speaks to us and says, "Fear not. I have claimed you. I have called you by your name. You are mine." (Is 43: 1)

Please live each moment of your life with this awareness of your true identity.