

Taking Names

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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These days we're in the season of surveillance: "He's making a list and checking it twice. Gonna find out who's naughty or nice. Santa Claus is coming to town." Old Santa is taking names.

Or the ubiquitous "Elf on a shelf" in which an elf shows up in the days leading to Christmas somewhere in the house to keep an eye on children to make sure they're behaving and then the elf takes these surveillance reports back to the North Pole. The elf is taking names.

I remember in the second and third grade when the teacher might have to step out of the room. She would appoint a student from the classroom to sit up at the teacher's desk and take the names of anyone talking or disrupting the class. Of course, from the class's perspective, the chosen student was a trader, a quisling, a collaborator with the Powers – except that when we were chosen to monitor the class, we did the same thing.

Once a girl I did not like and who did not like me was appointed class monitor. I knew my goose was cooked. The two of us competed for the highest grades and best coloring. I usually made the higher grade, but she always beat me in the best coloring. Sure enough when the teacher returned she had taken my name. I was in trouble and had to do some explaining.

Taking names, keeping lists. Sometimes benign but often not.

For example, the relatively new phenomena called “surveillance capitalism” is about how technology monitors, watches, surveilles, what we’re looking at on a computer or device, what we listen to and what we’re talking about, then turning that around to target our predictive behavior, desires, and purchasing habits. Every search, every like or dislike, every click on Google or Facebook, Yahoo or Twitter or YouTube is watched and analyzed and used. Keywords are listened to in our conversations. For example, this week I talked with our daughter Callie about a new mattress. Now, my email, internet, and Google searches are covered in ads about mattresses.

But the same technology used to monitor our buying a mattress or coat or winter socks, can be used for other activities. Technology gathers our personal data (“takes our names”) from mass surveillance of the internet and sells the data without our permission and without our knowledge. Capitalism seeks to make a profit off of it, but often other organizations or institutions or agencies seek the same information in the interest of targeting us with certain kinds of stories from the news or getting various kinds of information in front of us so that we will see and interpret information in particular ways and takes particular actions.

Of course, nowadays it is rare to be able to do anything on the internet without some entity asking for our name and email address.

Back in 2013 when Austin Heights and pipeline blockaders were actively opposing the Keystone tarsands pipeline, I remember a Sunday morning when the police drove through our parking lot about the time church was to begin, taking

videos of the car license plates and videoing us as we went into church. They were taking names.

There is story after story of neighbors taking names and giving them to authorities in places like Croatia during the 90's. Or neighbors turning in the names of Jews to the Nazis. During WWII in Norway, the head of the government Vidunk Quisling collaborated so much with the Nazis that his name "quisling" has become a synonym for collaborator and trader. He gave the Nazis names.

The Gospel according to John tells us that the Authorities were investigating John the Baptist. They were taking names. John the Baptist was out near Bethany, beyond the Jordan River, in some pretty rough country. People were flocking to hear him preach and were being baptized by him. "Listen, this John the Baptizer fellow is becoming pretty popular and his message is spreading yet he has no authorization, no license, no permit, and he's out of (our) control. We must investigate. Go take names. Make lists. Let's find out who he is and who these people are." So, the Authorities immediately start taking names, turning on their recorders, scribbling down names in their notebooks. "Who are you?" is the first word out of their mouths according to John 1:19. People from Bethany and beyond were coming out to hear John and now they find themselves having to give their names and information to very official looking types asking a lot of questions: "Who are you? Where are you from? What's your address? Why are you here?"

Years ago, I served on the grand jury. I remember a one law enforcement officer saying that he pulled over a suspect and the suspect acted nervous. Someone on the grand jury pointed out that everyone who is pulled over by police are nervous. The officer said, "No. Only people who are guilty are nervous if they

are pulled over.” At that point, the grand jury nearly exploded with corrections and disagreements with the policeman, “What are you talking about!? Every person is nervous when pulled over even if they are perfectly innocent.”

When we are pulled over and asked for our license and registration, we sense we are already on trial, being judged. “Officer, have I done something wrong?” And you bet, it makes us nervous. Name taking labels us, puts us in a category, a slot. It is a way of saying, “The authorities are checking to see if you’re keeping your place, been naughty or nice.”

When the officials said to John, “Who are you?” John knew that they were trying to label him and put him under control. He was being put on notice: We know who you are and we’re watching you. Make sure you toe the line. Make sure you stay in your place.”

In Luke 2, the famous Christmas story says, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” In other words, Caesar was taking a census, registering everyone, taking names.

John is being put under scrutiny, being put on a list. “Who are you?” And John responds immediately, “I am not the Messiah.”

“So, who are you? Are you Elijah?”

John says, “No, I’m not Elijah.”

“Are you the prophet?”

“No.”

“Then who are you? Give us something. We have to take names back to the higher ups in Jerusalem. What do you have to say about yourself?”

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness... I tell you among you stands one whom you don't know, who is coming after me, and whom I am not worthy to untie his sandals” (John 1:19-25).

Every time the officials try to pin John down, he shifts the attention to someone else. They want to talk about John. John wants to talk about the one who is coming. They want to know who John is. John tells them they have no idea of the one who is coming.

The officials want a simple answer so they can check the box and fill in the paperwork. But John won't give a straight answer. They zero in on him and he points to someone else.

There is the hint here, early on that those in Authority and John have completely different understandings of names. The officials take names to control and label, pigeonhole. For them to know your name is kind of like putting you under a microscope and dissecting you. Or putting you under a single light bulb and interrogating you.

For John, both the Baptizer and the Gospel writer, names and knowing has to do with something much more intimate and relational. For the Baptizer to say, “There is one coming you don't know,” is more than commenting on their ignorance. It's commenting on their inability to understand. To use the language of Bonhoeffer, it is their stupidity, their willful refusal to understand anyone or anything they can't control and objectify. The officials are like the character in the

old *Dragnet* TV show from the 60's. Sgt. Joe Friday would say, "Just the facts, mam." They want facts. John is talking about knowledge. They want data. John speaks of insight and understanding. "You fellows have no idea," says John the Baptizer.

Many years ago, when I was a very new pastor, I was eating lunch with Browning Ware, the long-time pastor of First Baptist Church Austin. When the waitress came over, Browning always addressed her by name. I commented on it and Browning said, "Always look at their name tags and call a person by their name. It's about being human with one another. A tiny moment of grace, that says, 'You're more than a data-processor taking my order for lunch. You're a person.'"

To this day, whenever possible, I try to address people by their name. My problem is the older I get the more I need their name tags to be large print.

The authorities want just the facts to objectively scrutinize John and later Jesus. Label and control. John is talking about being human, about building bridges and nurturing connections.

According to John our Gospel writer, the very next day, followers of John meet Jesus who invites them to come and stay with him. "To stay" is the same word that can also be translated as remaining, abiding, living with, being with, and participating with." Jesus says, "Come on, join in and taste and see. Come live with me awhile and get to know me, connect with me (John 1: 29-42ff).

The authorities want to take names. Jesus gives us his name, shares his name. Sharing names has to do with being with one another and God, of

participation and relationship. Jesus shares names. The religious and political authorities take names.

But part of what's going on in John, is while the Authorities try to take and control, nail down, and pigeonhole, the very one they don't understand refers to himself as "I am." Seven times in John, Jesus refers to himself as "I am," – "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the door for the sheep" (10:7, 9), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14), "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "I am the true vine" (15:1, 5).

Over in chapter 18, the Authorities and their minions, fearful of losing control, get their guns and their lists of names, and head to the Garden of Gethsemane looking for Jesus of Nazareth. They meet Jesus but do not know him, partly because their noses are in their list of names, and partly because, as John the Baptizer says, "Among you stands one whom you do not know" (1:26). Jesus says, "Who are you looking for?" They say, "Jesus of Nazareth." And Jesus replies, "I am." And the entire mob falls to the ground. A second time Jesus asks the same question and a second time, when he says "I am" the mob falls to the ground.

For Jesus to say, "I am" of course, refers back to Exodus 3 when God speaks to Moses through the burning bush and responds to Moses's asking for God's name. God says, "I am." God's name is a verb. The verb "to be," which grammar teachers say, is the most irregular verb in the English language. It cannot be pinned down, it cannot be controlled, and it cannot be pigeonholed. It moves and changes. The very nature of the "to be" verb is that it is a linking word, it connects.

In John 3 Nicodemus comes to Jesus trying to find out who he is, trying to get Jesus into a pigeonhole so that he can study him, and in a sense, control who Jesus is to Nicodemus. But Jesus talks about being born of the Spirit, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8).

This Jesus is the “I am” of God who cannot be objectified, labeled, and controlled. To know Jesus is like going with the wind. To know Jesus means to walk with and in Jesus, over time, while also, linking and connecting with others who are doing the same thing.

The Authorities finally take Jesus and nail him down – on the cross. But even there he cannot be controlled. In three days, he is resurrected, escaping not only the Authorities cross, but also breaking free from their attempts to encase him, entomb him.

Our challenging invitation is are we willing to take the leap and join with Jesus? It’s risky – who knows where we’ll end up or who we will become and who will share our common life with? And these days, there are so many people who are afraid of anything or anyone they can’t control. There are a lot of folks taking names.

Jesus does not take names. He shares names. And he expects us to do the same – sharing, connecting, linking, nurturing community and a common life and a common good.

In the classic 1977 television series *Roots*, there is a scene in which the slave traders are trying to break the spirit of the young black man named Kunta Kinte, whom they had captured and enslaved. They tie him to a tree and began to beat and whip him into submission. They are forcing him to take a new name. Instead of Kunta Kinte, they say your name is Toby. He resists but they keep on whipping and torturing. “Your name is Toby,” they say again, and again he resists. They whip him again and again and again, until finally, finally in great pain and exhaustion, he submits and speaks his slave name, “Toby.”

Tom Long says he once heard a black minister speak of his own anger and rage when he saw that episode. For a moment, the minister said, he was consumed with hatred, not only for those who were beating Kunta Kinte, but for all white people, and for any and all who through racism and White Supremacy seek to control and dehumanize, disenfranchise and marginalize others. The minister said that the only thing that kept the hatred from controlling him and settling into his heart, was the deep awareness of his faith in another man who was also tied to a tree and beaten and tortured. He said, “They took this man’s life, but they never took his name. And one day every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess that name: Jesus Christ is Lord” (from Tom Long, *Something Is About to Happen...*, p. 30-31).

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.