

## *Nouns Are Highly Over-rated*

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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I want to begin with a recollection, one that reaches way back into my ever-lengthening history. I was in Turkey sometime in the early 1980's with members of the Board of Directors of the United Church Board for World Ministries. At that time, our denomination supported the work of about 40 missionaries in Turkey, most of them involved in secondary education, including the education of girls, which was one of our most notable contributions to Turkish society. But the handwriting was on the wall, or rather in the ledger books, for our continuing work in Turkey, and we, board members and missionaries and staff were trying to figure out, with our Turkish colleagues, how we were going to deal with our budgetary realities. Sound familiar?

It had been a difficult meeting, as budget meetings tend to be, and as decisions about the future of people and of institutions tend to be. But our time together was ending with a communion service. Our Turkish colleagues quietly left as we assembled around our communion table set up in our Tarsus school library—yes we supported a school in St. Paul's hometown. All the Turks left except for one man, who stayed and took a seat among us. Well, that was fine, of course, but then came the time for communion by intinction. To the surprise of probably everyone, and the discomfort of some, he came forward to receive the bread and the cup along with the rest of us. After the service, a member of our group approached him, greeted him warmly, and said, "I didn't realize that you're a Christian." "Does the name matter so much to you?" was the man's response. It was an uncomfortable and an enlightening moment.

I'm going to shift gears, but I'll come back to this memory. We are, almost all of us, of an age when we remember from our English classes the definition of a noun. "A noun is the name of a person, place or thing." The *name* of a person place or things, not the thing itself; it's a name. In ancient times, and in many societies today—not so much ours anymore—personal names actually carried a lot of meaning. Giving someone a name often represented an effort to define a relationship, perhaps a family relationship, or, in Arabic names, for example, a relationship with God. Abdallah is a common name among both Christian and Muslim Arabs, for example, and it means, simply "servant of God."

Names can be descriptive or aspirational. Think of Simon being renamed Peter, "the Rock;" by Jesus, or of Jacob, who was renamed "Israel," by God. Given Peter's denial of Jesus on the eve of the crucifixion and his repeated episodes of obtuseness," Jesus' referring to Simon as "the rock," would probably fall into the category of "aspirational." Jacob means, "ankle-grabber" because of his effort to precede his twin brother from the womb by grabbing Esau's ankle. Being the elder son, even if by a minute or two, would convey benefits. Israel, his new name, on the other hand, means, the one who struggled with God. Both of these names would be descriptive of different phases in Jacob's rather complicated life.

Names can be a big deal, both personal names and the names we give to whole groups of people. So our Turkish friend who received communion with us was, in a way, challenging us to go beyond the use of a name, a noun, to define him. What was clearly more important to him was not the designation of what we assumed to be his religious identity—almost everyone in Turkey is, in name and culture anyway, a Muslim. What was important to him, in that setting, was the relationship he had with us, a relationship based upon our common goal of providing a good education for children, and by literally communing with us, he was indicating that we were all part of a cause that transcended our official communal identities .

“Is the name so important to you?” In these times, it often seems that what defines us, what sets us apart from others, what we call ourselves, has become more important than what could bring us closer together, some higher cause that prompts a common devotion beyond our team, our tribe, our nation or yes, our religion. Beyond our names.

The missionaries who went to Turkey and to other places in the world where they encountered people of other faiths were sent into a world of nouns, of names. Early on, their mission was to change those names from Muslim or Jewish or Hindu or Buddhist to Christian, or, in the case of other Christians, from Orthodox or Catholic to Protestant. And yet what they encountered was a world of verbs, where what people were called became less important than what they did. Any mission involving people, local or international, whether it’s personal or institutional, must be a two-way street. It must be relational, or mutual, or it isn’t really mission; it’s conquest.

And what, you may ask on this Trinity Sunday, does this have to do with the Trinity? I’m going to argue that the worst thing the church did to Trinity was to name it, to put a definite article in front of the noun, the name that we’ve given to what in reality isn’t a concept so much as it is a relationship. It’s what we human beings do. We like to know things, which is another way of saying that we like to control them, to have power over them. That’s what we do when we give them names. Remember how Genesis makes such a big deal over God’s giving Adam the power to name every living thing? Perhaps that was the first step toward human domination of nature rather than honoring creation and coexisting within it, rather than having a relationship with it..

I think that I’ve preached three Trinity Sunday sermons in this church—thank you, Tim, for the exquisite timing of your retreats. One of the things I said in an earlier Trinity sermon is that you will never find the word “trinity” in the Bible. The traditional members of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit; or Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit

make their occasional New Testament appearance as a triad, but more often they are either separate, or in a pair. So when we talk about Trinity, we are dealing not with something scriptural, certainly not with something Jesus taught, but with something that was created by the church, which means that it falls into the category of “tradition.”

Tradition can either conceal or distort an original insight, as dross dulls or conceals the underlying gold; or it can enrich an original insight, as a patina may deepen the beauty of an original painting. It can be a vestige or a stage of evolution. Tradition is what accumulates over time, as a result of the near infinite variety of human behaviors or opinions. There is no hard and fast rule about how one deals with tradition between the extremes of rejecting it out of hand—later, therefore worse—and swallowing it hook line and sinker. “Even if it doesn’t make sense, it’s still a teaching of the church.” Actually there is a hard and fast rule: we should approach questions of faith with an open mind, but not open at both ends, and, more important, with an open heart. And that is the terrifying demand of faith, which is freedom. Ultimately, faith resides in the individual, not in some external authority. Faith is human, with all the variability that being human entails.

Which brings me back to this teaching, this tradition of the church. For some, Trinity, a confection of the church, is a thing in itself—a doctrine to be believed or rejected. Belief in the Trinity, or non-belief in the Trinity was at the center of a famous dispute on the congregational side of our denomination (which itself is another naming word). It was what led to the split between the Congregationalists and the Unitarians. In many New England towns today you can see the remnants of that split, in the sharing of town greens by white-spined Congregational and Unitarian churches. A UCC pastor once quipped to me when I admired the Unitarian church in his town, “They got the furniture and we got the faith,”

As I seek to appreciate the trinitarian approach of the tradition in which I was nurtured, I am helped by an image evoked by fourth-century church fathers in Cappadocia, in what is now Turkey. They saw Trinity not as an entity, something to believe or not believe in, but as a process. They spoke of the members of the Trinity as being a part of a “dance.” I’m imagining a circle dance, or a hora, where no one takes the lead. Sometimes I think of it as a kind of rollicking form of evolution, or, to put it in musical terms, as a fugue. I have used these images not because they capture a reality, but as imperfect but helpful metaphors. Metaphors always limp. Ultimate reality is not capable of being captured. It is not a static goal of understanding to be attained, but a constant movement toward God, however herky-jerky, or maybe I should say “hokey pokey,” however inconsistent and sporadic that movement may be.

Or, to go back to that dreary grammar lesson we began with, the insufficiency of nouns. There are seven words in the Hebrew Bible that are translated as God. One of them is in the plural. The “most sacred name of God” is usually read as Yahweh; in one of our beloved hymns, it’s Jehovah. But the pronunciation is not certain because in Hebrew the vowels aren’t provided. Actually, all we know about this word is that it’s not really a name. It’s a form of the verb “to be.” So God is not a noun; God is a verb, or verbal noun meaning something like “being,” or “becoming,” or “the great I AM.” That most sacred word for God is never even pronounced by Orthodox Jews because the act of pronunciation (naming, again) is a act of limiting.

So today I have preached a sermon about Trinity, which is one of those efforts to point toward ultimate reality, to name the unnameable, what the theologian Paul Tillich called the “Ground of All Being.” But that sterile formulation lacks a smidgeon of the intimacy that is an intrinsic part of what constitutes relationship. I remember a colleague, parodying the farewell formula of the late Billy Graham, saying, “May the Ground of All Being bless you real good.”

If we go back to that fundamental understanding of Trinity as relationship: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, we perhaps get a sense of God not as a self-sufficient monolithic entity, but as a dynamic not to be defined, but to be discovered in ever-unfolding mystery; the One, who created us and who is so close to us as to have chosen to live among us as Jesus did, and to embody love among us, and the One whose Spirit continues to live among us to inspire love toward each other; the One who invites us to communion, and communes with us. And what we call that One isn't so important at all.

Amen