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What's in a Name?

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.

Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare

He calleth them all by their names.

Psalm 147:4 King James Version

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...

John 10:14 New International Version (NIV)

I have always found the image of the good shepherd comforting. That tall, gentle person returning to the fold with the lost lamb tucked securely in the crook of their arm. That quiet soul who will never stop searching for us when we've gone astray, who always has a practical solution for any problem.

Now our word “pastor” is simply the Latin word for “shepherd.” “Pastor” comes from same root word as “pasture.” You get the idea – pasture, pastor, shepherd.

Pastors watch over us, look after us. They tend the flock, know who we are, know when we have gone missing. The ones who do not give up, who go out to find us, to return us to the fold. The ones who stay with us. The ones who call us by name.

One of the many things I love about our Christian tradition is how we use our Christian names, the name given to us when we are christened or baptized, the name we acquired when we were “sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

We pray solemnly for safe travels for John or healing for Bill or the repose of the soul of Mary. We even pray for guidance for our president Joe. I find being addressed by name is deeply spiritual.” I feel it when, during the Eucharist, the cup is offered to me, and I am addressed by name.

I don’t recall exactly when it happened, but at some point in my medical career I started addressing patients, even those I was seeing for the first time, by their Christian name. Awkward at first, it soon seemed natural – “How can I help you, Jack?” instead of “Tell me why you are here, Mr. Wilson.”

I do remember that I started this more personal greeting in the store-front clinic where I worked for a large part of my career. There, the vast majority of my patients did not speak English as a first language. Over the years I tried to learn enough of their languages to at least greet them with a few familiar words. Spanish was by far the most common; I came to speak it comfortably.

Now Spanish has a feature we don’t have in English – an honorific title used with the first name. You can, for instance, call someone Don Juan or Doña Maria. It sounds a little old-fashioned but not as stiff as “Señor Gonzalez” or “Señora Martinez.” At the same time, it is much more respectful than simply “Juan” or “Maria.” And using “Don” and “Doña ” became a natural way to start addressing my patients by their first names.

But after years of seeing the same patients, getting to know them and their families, journeying with them through long bouts of depression or months of cancer treatment, my words changed again. Without really thinking about it, I started addressing my patients not as “Don Miguel” or “Doña Juana,” but simply as “hermano” or “hermana” – “brother” or “sister.” I’m not sure why, but it just felt right.

A few of my patients grinned when I first called them siblings. It was, no doubt, a bit odd, a bit unexpected, but it soon became the norm. And then I suddenly realized that occasionally their language would change as well. Every so often, a patient would say not, “Thank you, doctor” but rather, “Thank you, pastor.” Sometimes they would quickly correct themselves, “Sorry, I mean doctor.” But other times, it slipped out naturally and that was just what they called me.

I like to think that it was not a mistake. I like to think that as our relationship grew, as it deepened, I was not just their doctor. I was also their pastor, their good shepherd, the one who always had a practical solution for any problem, the one who stuck with them until they were safely back in the fold.

Care for someone and they will care for you. Call someone by name and they will call you by name.

Shakespeare implies that words are merely labels. He is wrong. A rose by any other name is just not as sweet.

The Psalmist of Psalm 147 knows the truth – “He calleth them all by their names.” The Gospel of John 10:14-15 gets it right – I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

What we call each other matters a great deal.