Once upon a fall semester Maya Angelo was teaching creative writing at Wake Forest University. As the class began she spent the entire first session having her students introduce themselves, pausing to ask some to spell their names and also posing curious questions about family roots. Almost everyone in the class had signed up to learn from the famous writer and were not at all pleased beginning in such a tedious way.

The next week brought them all to the second class session and Maya went around the room again and reviewed the student’s names, this time having committed almost all of them to memory. She was fully aware that the class was restless, frustrated and even irritated.

When she was finished she turned and asked, “Friends, why do you think I just spent nearly 10 percent of valuable class time making sure you know each other’s names?” After a deafening silence she answered her own question. “Because your name is a sign of your dignity. When you recognize someone’s name, you recognize him or her not just as a human being but also as a person. One of the greatest ways you bestow dignity on someone is calling them by their name.”

Names are that important! In fact, to get biblical about it, names in scripture are never merely a convenient mechanism for social ordering, recognition, identification or stratification. They are an expression of the very essence of a person and reveal something of their character.

Martin Copenhaver writes, “We are intimately tied to our names in ways that are powerful, unconscious and mysterious.” They are significant in ways we often take for granted. They distinguish us from others in a personal way. And so the desire to know the name of another person or to hear the sweet sound of our own name being called is not a benign event – it is surrounded by a personal and often profound longing to know and to be known for who we are.

Frederick Buechner takes it a step deeper, and, with an oddly spelled name like his I can understand. “No one takes their own name casually. If my name were different, I would be different. If someone mispronounces my name in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what’s foolish is me. If someone forgets my name, I feel that it is I who have been forgotten.”

Let’s turn our thoughts to Jesus. He was heard to ask, and on more than just one occasion, “What is your name?” Or, differently, “Did you see that woman?” Or different once more, “Who are you looking for?” Of course, we don’t know how good he was at remembering names. But he had the spacious capacity to see a single person in the midst of a crowd, as one among many. And he knew that asking for and knowing the name of another person, and giving one’s own, is the first step of a relationship.
As best we can tell, Jesus was a people person of the first order. He was not a loner; he did not shy away from others; he was not reticent. His entire ministry was immersed in relationship with others, lots and lots of others. He had the rare gift to see people beneath the surface or façade to the heart – not because he was clairvoyant, but because he knew that in every soul is a unique treasure and that reveals something of the image of God. Names then, and relationships and people invite us to an interactive mystery.

So wouldn’t you just know it! Last Monday afternoon I made a quick visit to bring the Sunday New York Times to my mother at the McAuley - one day old. As is usually the case on Monday my head was beginning to churn and think toward the next sermon, as in today! For a preacher Sunday is always coming!

I stepped into the elevator as my companion for the ride said to me, “I can tell you are Pennie Campbell’s son but I don’t remember your name.” Before I could respond she spoke more, “You’re the minister.” And then again, “First Church.” And then again, “On the green.” Finally I responded. “Yes, my name is Geordie.”

Oh, “Gordy” she said with a nod. “No,” I corrected, “but close. It’s Geordie.” She was listening phonetically, “rhymes with shorty.” “Yes,” I said, “that’s one way to remember it.” “How do you spell it?” she asked. So I spelled my name. “Where does a name like that come from?” she queried. “It’s from Scotland, the proper name for George.” “Is that on your birth certificate?” (I could not believe the question!) “No,” I said, “We would need a longer ride on the elevator to explain it.”

And then she did a beautiful thing. She said, “I like your name. It has a happy sound to it.” Then, stepping off at her floor she said, “It was a pleasure talking with you, Geordie.”

Once upon an ancient day Moses was trying to wiggle free from the hold that God seemed to have on his life. It was very early in their relationship. Moses had a list of reasons, five of them by count, to fuel his resistance. But God had already called Moses by name, a significant fact, and their relationship was taking form.

His second excuse was that he could not do as God was asking because he did not know God’s name. The encounter is iconic, “Okay God I will do as you ask, but when the others say, Who has sent you to us? What is his name? What shall I say?” God responded, “I am who I am. You shall say, I am has sent me to you.” It’s a binding moment. The connection between them was confirmed by knowing one another’s names.

Scripture says that God calls each one of us by name. There is welcome assurance in that, a kind of cosmic hospitality just to be aware that God knows who we are. It tells us that God is not an impersonal force. But there is also more to it. It actually places us in a very holy and heady place. After all, if our names are knowable to God then we matter. And if we matter to God, then there just might be something God has in mind for us to do.
Place it at center now and hear it this plain. God wants to be in relationship with you: and you . . . and you . . . and you . . . and me! That’s nothing to take lightly!

Who we really are matters to God, and our names are intricately connected to that truth. That’s why face-to-face conversations, relationships, and community are so important!

That’s why a spirit of hospitality matters so much here at First Church. It’s why attentiveness to one another, to those new to us or seasoned, really matters. Nametags, coffee hour, greeting one another in the pews are only the invitational edges!

And I believe this as deeply as I go. God wants us to be and to become fully hospitable in our life together as the holy context where God is. “I Am who I Am,” Moses was told. “Tell them I Am sent you.” And Jesus, years and years later: “Lo I Am with you, even to the end of the age.”

What an amazing promise as we start up a new year all over again! May it be so! Amen.

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4 Ibid.