

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Colton M. Smith on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 3, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### **God's nickname**

In the Name of God who created me, in the Name of Jesus who redeemed me, and in the Name of the Spirit who sustains and guides me. AMEN

Put away your bulletins. This sermon, unfortunately, is not related to any of the scriptural passages that we have just heard. I want to share with you an experience that I had recently on a conducted retreat. I was at the Sea of Peace House of Prayer on Edisto Island. This is a retreat center run by Adrian Dominican Sisters of the Roman Catholic Church. Our leader was a member of this religious order.

This event began in the traditional manner. The leader introduced herself and talked about the value of silence and reflection in a relaxed peaceful environment. We spent some time in silent prayer and meditation. After an hour or two, the leader asked us to think about our relationship with God, a very appropriate topic for a spiritual retreat. Okay. I'm thinking about God. How do you relate God? That is to say, how do you express your relationship with God in the manner in which you address God? For you see, the way you speak to a person, the name you use in addressing a person tells you something about how you see the relationship you have with that person. Do you speak to God as "Sir?" "Father?" "Jesus?" "Lord?" "Eternal One?" Almighty? All of these titles speak about how we see our relationship with the One we call God. Okay, I can do this! I will say, "Abba." Father seems too formal; "Abba" is the Aramaic word for father denoting familial intimacy. I guess it would be like saying "Papa" or "Daddy." After all Jesus called God, "Abba." If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.

We were then asked to think about how this formal address, influenced how we related to God? Some of us shared our names for God and what significance we believed this showed. All of this is really "old hat" with me. I'm afraid my mind began to wander (like you're listening to this sermon).

As the retreat progressed, I began to relax and to live into my quiet time with God. After a couple of hours, the leader asked us again to address God. This time she requested that we give God a different name. She asked us to give God a "nickname."

Sometimes the characteristics of a person or life events are so significant that we give that person a name that is fitting to the circumstances. It may be affectionate, ridicule or humorous. At one stage in my life I was called "Red." When I look in the mirror now, I can't imagine why. My wife's nickname is "Tigger."

People in the Bible attached great significance to the names that one was called. The name denoted character, identity, status.

People in the Bible actually changed their names because of significant events in their lives. After “wrestling with God,” Jacob, which means “heel grabber” or “supplanter” (Genesis 27:36) was named Israel, meaning “he strives with God” (Genesis 32:28). Simon, the Galilean fisherman, becomes Peter, meaning “rock” (Matthew 16:18-19), a sign of the role that he would play in the life of the early Christian movement.

Before I go any further, I need to explain something. When I was about eight years old, my grandmother died. She was very special in my life. I remember sitting in that “well-padded” lap of hers. She was more comfortable than a big sofa chair! She had a small dog. My grandfather gave the dog to me. For the next ten years that little terrier was my constant companion. We went everywhere together. He seemed to know my moods better than I did. He was never “out of sorts” with me. The terrier’s name was Buddy. So I chose “Buddy” as my nickname for God.

Having chosen my nickname to God, I was then asked to spend some time (actually one hour) composing two letters. The first letter was to be addressed to “Buddy” from me. What do I want to say to “Buddy.” The second letter was Buddy’s reply to my letter. In Buddy’s letter to me, Buddy was to address me as he sees me. What is Buddy’s nickname for me? As I addressed God, as I have experienced him, I was being asked to have God address me as I believe God sees me. Boy, would I need an hour...and more. No, actually within only a few minutes, I began to write and the words just flowed out. Our time in quiet reflection, prayer and silence had opened a deep reservoir within me. Here are my two letters.

Dear Buddy,

Thank you for being with me. Your presence has always encouraged me to be better than I am and to strive to make your world a better place. Your presence has warmed me when my heart grew cold and gave me strength to reach out to others. Your presence has made me aware of my selfishness and caused me to be ashamed and to seek forgiveness. Your presence had always reach out to draw me closer to you and to feel your acceptance of me. Your presence has guided me through dark places in my life and been my beacon of light. Whatever I’ve done to receive the praise and thanks from others is because your presence was allowed to shine through me, in spite of my preoccupation with self. Your presence has allowed me to seek within myself my true being created by You, redeemed by You and sanctified by You, my dearest Buddy.

Love, Colton

Now “Buddy’s” reply. What is Buddy’s nickname for Colton?

“Beloved,”

Why do you doubt my love and care for you? Have I not always been there? Is not your life blessed? Do you not know the source of this blessedness? Of course, you do, but you often forget, you often go off on your own. I have to remind you from time to time (actually more times than not) that I am here. You have only to open your eyes to see my

presence all around you. You have only to look deep within you to feel my loving presence, because I am with you always. Never doubt me! You may doubt yourself, but never doubt me and my constant love for you and let my presence continue to lead your blessed life.

Love, "Buddy"

Well, that was my experience! What about you? What is your "nickname" for God? What is that affectionate, endearing title you would call the One who created you, sustains you and lives in and with you? What have been the significant experiences of God in your life? What letter would you write to this person? What would you say? How would your "nickname" for God help you express your deepest feelings for God? How would the One to whom you have written answer you? What name does God call you? It is a very simple exercise. It only requires three things: 1) that you relax, 2) take time, 3) take God into your solitude. Be honest with yourself and with God. Try it! You will be surprised...and blessed.

Let us pray:

Thank you God that we can have "play time" with you. Thank you for being so understanding that you can smile and enjoy our times together. Continue to be with us always, for you are truly our greatest lover and our truest friend. AMEN.