

Being Known
November 9, 2008

In her memoir *Almost There*, Dublin author Nuala O'Faolain talks about the difficulty she had in writing her life story. During one period of her life, she had presented a books program on television, and for a while she said that she was reasonably well known. However, it was a program that held little interest for most of the viewers, so many people had simply seen her face just long enough to change channels.

O'Faolain wrote that on occasion in pubs or supermarkets, someone would come up to her and ask, "Are you somebody?" That question caused her to ponder a question that led to her writing the book. Actually it became two questions: "How do people come to believe they are of value?" and "Could a person looking back on their life gather from it the self-approval to reply to that question, 'Yes, I am!'"

That's the issue with which we're wrestling this morning, because I suspect there are plenty of times when we feel like a nobody, as though we're invisible. Sometimes I feel that way when I'm driving, and another driver turns in front of me. I've been known to say out loud to myself, "Gosh! I guess I'm invisible today!"

However, there are other times this sense comes into play, too. Have you ever been in conversation with another person, only to have them look right past you, as though you're not even

there? Or, have you ever been in a gathering of one sort or another, and no one seems to notice that you're even present, let alone talk to you? I've been in those situations, and I would bet some of you have, too.

Christopher Reeve wrote about how people were often invisible to him prior to his fall from a horse that eventually took his life. In his book *Still Me*, he said, "Before the accident I think that I tended to pigeon hole: This is the guy behind the counter at the gas station, I pay him with my credit card and maybe he says, 'Have a nice day,' and I say, 'Thanks.' Or this is someone in a deli who makes me a sandwich, but I don't really care about him. I don't think of him as a person with individual characteristics and a history of his own. It's so easy not to really see people."

I think he hit the nail on the head, and what he said is probably as true for us as it was for him. Not only do we often feel invisible to others, but others are often invisible to us, too. It is easy not to really see people, and yet most of us seem to have this yearning to know others and to be known. The problem is that it's really a "catch 22." As someone said, "**At the very core of our being is the yearning to be known. It is our deepest hunger and often our greatest fear.**"

Both realities play themselves out in our lives, even in some of the relationships that we consider to be among our closest. Paula D'Arcy talked about the death of her 83-year-old grandmother, and the experience the family had when

meeting with the pastor to discuss her funeral service. She said that they knew names, dates and places, and some amusing anecdotes and significant moments. However, she was stunned to realize that none of them really knew *her*. No one, D'Arcy said, could say what her true feelings, needs and loves were; her grandmother had lived and died and never seemed to have been deeply known.

Why is that? Why do we have this yearning to be known, and yet be so afraid to do let ourselves be known? Why do hold back from fully knowing another person? I think it has to do with fear—the fear that lies deep inside us that we'll be found out, that we aren't really who we say we are. We're afraid our dark side will show and then we'll be rejected or abandoned. Sometimes we hold back before we are afraid of allowing ourselves to get too close to another person because we just could get hurt. Maybe we're even afraid that if we reveal our true selves by being real and honest, we will discover that our life is a farce, that we still aren't good enough.

What does it take for us to know and be known? Succinctly put, I believe it takes the willingness to be vulnerable, a sincere humility, and a rare form of courage. We have to be willing to be real, and take off the masks we all wear from time to time. We have to be willing to share who we are—to tell our stories, with the good stuff, and the things we'd rather keep to ourselves. We have to be willing to listen to another's story without judgment and care, really care about him or her as a person—care

about the pain, the hopes, the dreams, the joys and the sorrows. It's scary, and it's hard, but the benefits are worth it.

Stan shared a story with us about a member of his family who had moved back to her hometown after years of living elsewhere. She didn't know a soul, and felt pretty alone and isolated. Then one day, she happened to be in a grocery store, and someone from the musical group she had recently joined saw her and called to her. She said that was the first time anyone outside of her family had called her by name for many months. She was elated, and that was a turning point for her.

Or how about a story Steve Schaffner shared about his mother and one of their camping trips. He said that he had done what all kids did upon arriving at the campground—he had immediately gone out and begun playing with all the other kids, getting to know them. Later on, his mother was in the shower area of the campground when she encountered a couple of the girls who had met Steve and knew who she was. She returned to their camp site saying, "I am somebody! Those kids knew I was Steve's mom!" She was pleased that she was known and called by name

We all need that kind of experience—the experience of not being invisible, of being somebody rather than a nobody, the awareness of being known, and the willingness to get to know others. And we truly have a head start down that road, because I can assure you that there is One to

whom you and I are known, loved and treasured, and that One is God.

That is what our Bible passage is telling us this morning. It's the prophet Isaiah sharing good news from God, and I find it especially powerful when God says to the people of Israel and to us,

Do not be afraid—I will save you.

**I have called you by name—
You are mine...**

I will give up whole nations to save your life,

Because you are precious to me

And because I love you and give you honor.

Do not be afraid—I am with you!

I really believe that we will not come to know ourselves, nor will we allow ourselves to be known until we realize and believe at the very deepest level that we are, warts and all, loved by God. We are God's beloveds. That's what we hear repeated over and over again in the Bible, and that's what we see in today's passage: God has called us by name; we are known; we are precious to God; God loves you, and God loves me. As Augustine said, **"God loves each of us, as if there were only one of us,"** and I know with all my heart that's true.

The Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen paraphrased the Bible passage we have for this morning in his book, *Life of the Beloved*. I really like the way he did it, and I hope you will, too. He wrote:

"From the very beginning, I have called you by name. You are

mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depth of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own...We are one."

Amen, and amen.