



October 2, 2023

### **“What was Her Name?”**

I am a big fan of the nametags at St. Andrews, partly because I am new, and partly because I am mortifyingly forgetful. But names are so important; God named himself I AM. Adam named the flora and fauna of the new creation. We name ourselves Presbyterians. Names give us identity, dignity, recognition, and a sense of belonging.

Here is a true story. I was at a conference in Seattle a year after starting to research the *Christian* practice of the *shared* meal. One night a colleague and I headed down to the wharf to get some fish and fries. Getting on the line at the fish stand, we were approached by a homeless woman asking for money for feminine products. My colleague barked, “No,” refusing to make eye contact. But I was intrigued by the woman’s request because it had *never once occurred to me* how a homeless woman would manage such a monthly (and expensive) need. This woman was relatively young, maybe in her early thirties. One of her front teeth was missing, and her skin showed obvious signs of vitamin deficiency, likely related to alcohol abuse. Worse, she smelled of stale urine. Not wanting to give her money for alcohol, I instead said, “Well, let’s go to the drugstore together and I will help you get what you need.” The woman immediately argued that it was thirteen blocks to the nearest drugstore, and she’d just take the money. So, I looked her in the eyes and said, “No, I am sorry. I can’t give you any money.” She indelicately cursed at me and walked away. I found myself saying to her back, “Wait a minute!

Are you hungry?" The woman stopped in her tracks, turned back toward me with a question on her face (my colleague did too), and I said, "I am getting some fish and fries for supper. Do you want some supper?" She eyed me with a suspicious hope, but I managed to hold her gaze. "Well. And can I have a Coke too?" she asked. "Sure. You can have fish and fries and a Coke, same as I am having." She came toward me then, and touched my arm with her filthy, scaly hands, and I recoiled from both the physical contact that violated my "personal space" and her stench. She quizzed me again, "Can I have the biggest Coke they got?" "Sure, the biggest one they have".

By now we were next in line. I motioned for her to go ahead and order. With great flourish and glee, the woman ordered fish and fries and "the biggest Coke you got," ferociously tearing at the napkin dispenser to stuff napkins in her pocket. As I stepped up to make my order and pay, she turned to me, put her reeking arm around my shoulder and said, "Lady, you made my day. You made my whole month. Thank you."

She skipped down the line to fill her Coke cup. Her order came up, and she snatched the sack of food as I filled my drink. In that split second, the woman bounded off. My colleague was snarky, calling me an easy target. Still, I went to bed that night content that God had placed a need in front of me and I had responded with what was, for my introverted self anyway, a kindness and generosity that doesn't come naturally; I had loved my "neighbor" in an uncomfortable situation.

I was awakened by a voice around 2:00 a.m. I remember sitting up in the bed, frightened that someone had broken into the hotel room. I confirmed that I was awake, and not dreaming and then felt a shadow at the end of the bed. There *was* Someone in my room repeating the question with the still small voice that had awakened me, "What was her name?" "What? Whose name?" "What was the name of the woman at the fish stand?"

Then he was gone. I was wretched with remorse. I had bought a hungry woman some food. But, even after more than a year of study on the Christian practice of the *shared* meal, I had failed to dignify the woman's existence by asking her name and inviting her to sit with me for supper. I had not once thought to pray with her or for her, to speak about the Jesus I know and love. I had not shared a meal or had any serious conversation about God and his love with this distressed woman whose hunger was deep. That night I learned that while hunger comes in all shapes and sizes, and that non-judgmental love for the stranger is itself a hard and



strange calling, we are called nonetheless to attend to the needs of those whom Jesus places in our path, even when it means sharing an evening meal at close quarters around a table with someone who suffers from addiction and needs a bath almost as badly as she needs Christ. ***I gave her a meal, but I neglected to tell her about the coming Feast.***

I have since learned to step out of my shy zone and ask people their names, and to look for ways to share a meal, a cup of coffee, a piece of cherry pie. When people have names, they become real enough to us see how we can respond together to God's presence, embody his grace, and recognize and empower those who marginalized. Over time this simple act of sharing helps us invest in the other lives at the table. To reconcile, and laugh, and cry and share, for we live out our faith most beautifully when we care enough to know each other's names.

~Written by Julie Walton

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