

More than a name

Exodus 3:1-15

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Brian Russo

I am who I am to you.

I am who I am to me.

And I am also who I am not yet but who I want to be.

But for starters, I am Brian Russo.

By name alone on paper alone, that wouldn't really tell you much. Brian. Russo. It's just ten letters assembled together, and rather ordinarily at that, let's be honest. But I guess by their particular arrangement, and within certain conventionalities, you could attempt to identify me by a gender, a race and heritage, or even guess at a lifestyle. Maybe you could also search for and find online my job title, my address of employment, my town of residence. And, even perhaps discover that I am married and file taxes jointly, that I was raised in New Jersey, and that in 1981 I was born of Edna and Robert Russo and have a sibling named Travis. And now a wife named Anya (though Anna if we're being litigious). And a son named Seth. Sure. I am all of that.

Unless you're an identity thief, in which case I'm lying.

But I am also more than that. For like you, I want to believe I am more than mere titles and addresses, acquaintances and genealogies. But even so, who I am, and who I think I am, can so easily be reduced to simply who is talking about me to others.

For instance, I could be the Brian Russo who you heard was a jackass, who one day seemingly without reason just stopped talking to your best friend. Or, I could be the Brian Russo who was heartless, who suddenly just broke up with your daughter all those years ago in high school and crushed her heart. Or, I could even be the very same Brian Russo who cursed at you from my little car that rainy day on 309, or blocked you on social media because of your "insane posts," or outright abandoned you when you needed me most when you were alone in your car on the night that you took your life.

On the other hand, I might just be the Brian Russo who has been faithful to you and yours. Who has forgiven you and twice loved you. Who you have heard about laughing with, crying with, and embracing your loved ones. Who has even prayed with you in the hospital or at the graveside, holding your hand on the mountaintop and down in the ravine.

I am who I am. And in my life I have played both, and plenty somewhere in between the sinner and the saint; the enemy and the friend; the giver and the receiver; the failure and the achiever. But though all those parts make me who I am (and who I have in many ways sadly been), they need not, I believe, also dictate who I can be. Who I should be. Who I want to be if I will myself to be. For thank God, I have that agency. That grace and that freedom. To change. To become. To choose separating and leaving behind what was wrong for what is right, articulating and living into what is correct, and what is just, and what is necessary to say and do. Now more than ever.

Just like God called Moses thousands of years before, God is now calling me and now calling you to change course. To alter history. To rewrite your own story and the story of others with whom you would interact. And the good news is you don't need to be known anymore by who you were, or where you came from, or what happened before, or even the weight which your name carries at this very moment.... God does not require of you to have only ever been a saint, a helper, a friend, or even a good person at all. No, God invites all of us to take off our old shoes. The good fitting ones and the bad fitting ones. The pretty ones and the ugly ones. And to just leave them behind. Over there, back there somewhere. So that you can step onto new and holy ground. Without shame. Without pride. But as one who is new. For now, and from now on, you will only be known and remembered for what you do next. For how you choose to live, and act, and speak going forward from this moment.

Moses, Moses. Brian, Brian. Barbara, Barbara. Ed, Ed. Jillian, Jillian. Robert, Robert.

Who, me you wonder? Or the other Ed? No, you, Ed. Both of you Eds. All of you Eds. All of us. It's time. It's time to make ourselves newly known to each other, and to this nation, and to this world, expressly for what and whom we have chosen to be as followers of Jesus Christ, as believers in a loving, caring, unbiased, truthful, and equitable God.

You know, Moses' name is Egyptian in origin and it literally translates to "son" or "to be born." It's as non-descript as it gets. And his Hebrew derivative isn't much grander, simply meaning "to draw from." So connecting the dots, this guy who is basically just named "guy" who was also given up by his mother at three months old, cast down a river, and adopted by a foreign power is yet the one whom God appears before in a burning bush electing him to lead God's people! If those then are the kind of credentials that God has in mind, then all of us, from the very top to the very bottom, are vetted and ready to go. But only if we want to. If we choose to. We can't just stumble forward into it. We can just half-ass it or fake it. For remember, this is holy ground we're entering. If we want to.

And though Moses' initial objection was like, "wait God, who am I" (v.11) that you should choose me? God simply responds "I will be with you (v.12)." Not guaranteeing success. But guaranteeing a shared risk. A mutual vulnerability in taking a stand. And God doesn't flinch. God doesn't need to address who Moses was or who he wasn't, because who Moses is good enough for God to choose as God's own.

So it's not just a story then of rags to riches. From going from nothing to something. But also a commentary on how little our past, our transgressions, our station and upbringing matter to God. It don't matter if you were literally tossed into a river, or later even like David caught in the shower like some naughty adulterer, God can and will use you to make something new out of you if you want it. If you're ready to behold and hear and answer the call. If you're willing to take a stand, be authentic in your faith, and employ the gifts, and the voice, and the vision and the platform you've been given by the Spirit of God.

But if you feel that you don't have a voice to be heard or a platform to be used, let me just say this: you're wrong. You do. And we need to hear from you. It can be by letter. By call. On YouTube. Or Facebook. Anywhere. From everyone. It doesn't matter as long as we are in this together. Working

actively and loudly towards the better and just treatment of all in the boundless, borderless and diverse kingdom of Heaven that is here on Earth.

And so our story this morning is also no longer then just the story of Moses. But of yours and mine. A new chapter waiting to be written. For which there is no longer time to procrastinate. It's time to write. It's time to speak. And it's time to lead. Declaring and embodying the name of God to and within this weary world.

And what is that name, we ask alongside Moses? I am who I am. But also, translated more literally, I will be what I will be. It's not a noun. It's a verb. And therefore a dynamic and living action. And that divine action, as we see throughout Biblical and lived history, is aimed clearly towards redemption. Towards forgiveness. Towards justice. Towards liberation.

It is time to liberate. To declare and embody this name of God by becoming who you haven't been yet by speaking up for and defending the oppressed. By speaking up for and defending those who for too long have been trapped in a white-man's modern Egypt. By speaking up for and defending those who haven't had the chance or opportunity to even sniff at our privilege, who haven't had the grace of a law enforcement system working with and for them, who have for centuries been judged first by their skin color, their gender, their orientation, heritage, and nationality, and thereby reduced to inhumane names, sound bites, and disgusting stereotypes.

Who do you want to be? Who do you want to be remembered as by others? Who and what do you want your name to be associated with?

I have a choice and I have chance. You have a choice and a chance. Even if you've been the inappropriate family member, you have a chance. Even if you've been the fascist enabler, you have a chance. Even if you've been the race-baiter racist orator, you too have a chance and a choice. To be redeemed. To be something new. To become more than the letters on your certificate. To walk on holy ground.

My friends, speak up. Take action. And be who you should be, who you must be as a disciple, not of a cult, but of Jesus Christ. The one savior. Who gives each of us a new name and a chance of life after death.

Amen