Everyone needs heroes in the Christian faith. One of my personal heroes is Bishop William Willimon. It’s hard to think of anyone who has shaped United Methodism more in the last 25 years than this man. He is the author of over 60 books and is as accomplished as any theological scholar in the history of the church for the last 2,000 years. When I was at Asbury about 10 years ago, Bishop Willimon came and spoke. He presented lectures over a three day visit. I had never met him personally, although I had read his books for years. I decided to approach him and share my gratitude for the inspiration his writings had on my own spiritual formation. I addressed him as “Bishop Willimon” and his response to me, “Please, call me ‘Will.’” We ended up in an extended conversation and he showed enthusiastic interest during our interaction. After that encounter, I would email “Will” through the years and he welcomed questions when I would lean on him for pastoral advice. His answers were always thoughtful with no appearance of being inconvenienced. Bishop Willimon visited Mt. Olive College last February as a guest speaker. He didn’t know that I had relocated to this area in 2011. I hadn’t seen him personally in some time. Again, we ended up in extended conversation. He lingered with interest even though his schedule was very tight.

I compare my exchanges with Bishop Willimon with a pastor I had several years ago. When the pastor arrived at our parish, he insisted the first Sunday that we address him by his professional titles of “Rev. Dr.” We were informed that he had spent many years earning those letters and found the dignity which came from those accomplishments appropriate. There was one instance in conversation when a parishner called him by his first name, “Bob.” The “Rev. Dr.” immediately corrected the parishner, “Pardon, I prefer Rev. Dr.” During the years he served our parish, he may have received respect from the congregation, but I’m not sure he connected with us on a personal level. Although this minister is now retired, I often wonder if he looked back on title preferences as misplaced. Bishop Willimon possesses more degrees and distinctions than I have pairs of pants, and yet, he was quite intentional that ordinary people like me connect with him on a first name basis. I suppose everyone has a story about a famous person they’ve met. This is mine and I never tire of sharing how enlarging it was for a young pastor like myself to be received with respect from someone like him. First names have a way of doing that.

When Jesus came on the scene, He shocked everyone by insisting we relate to God on personal-name basis. Especially for the devout Jew, this seemed utterly irreverent. To this day, the pious Jew will not speak aloud the names of God in Scripture. These titles are viewed as too sacred for a human to even repeat. No one in history has possessed more elevation than Jesus did. He came as “Emmanuel,” literally, “God With Us.” There is no insistence on titles or status separating Him and His people. Jesus gave God a face and taught us to relate to God as friend to friend, child to parent. One thing I’ve discovered after my experience with “Will.” Such friendship shouldn’t reduce our respect. Rather, it draws us toward even higher honor.