

What's In a Name?
Luke 13:10-17
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The parents to-be picked two sets of names – a first and middle name – if their infant was a boy and another set if the baby was a girl. Though sonograms were done during the pregnancy they insisted on not knowing the sex of the baby. “We want to be surprised!” the husband said.

“Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?” all the relatives asked. And especially, “What will you name the baby?” But the parents chose to keep the names a secret until the baby was born.

The long anticipated time arrived and the baby came into this world. Her relatives were finally told, by phone, that she was “Lori Elizabeth” – “L-o-r-i” because her parents liked that name and spelling. And “Elizabeth” because it was her paternal grandmother’s, my mom’s middle name – the grandparent whose death had preceded her birth, the grandparent she would never know, yet the one whom she unknowingly seems to imitate from time to time. And now Lori’s daughter carries on the tradition, being given the middle name “Elizabeth.”

A few years later, the same ritual was repeated for Lori’s brother. Two sets of names chosen. More sonograms but the baby’s gender never revealed, the chosen names kept a secret from even the closest of family and friends until the infant’s birth. “John William” – “John” for his paternal grandfather – my Dad – the one who had just had major surgery for cancer. And “William” - - God forbid, for the boy’s Dad – me.

Of their maternal grandparents, my wife Roberta's parents, my children, thankfully, have been blessed with a multitude of wonderful memories. But of their paternal grandparents, my parents, our children really have no first-hand memories to carry with them. But our children do carry something else of my parents – they carry their names. Lori *Elizabeth* – John.

Names – Naming – Important stuff, isn't it? "What's in a name?" our sermon title asks. A lot. A whole lot.

For example, all of us know someone whose name just fits. It's hard to imagine them with some other name. I met one such person when I coached our son's youth baseball team. On our team was a boy named Bruno. Now guess what position Bruno played – catcher, of course! Where else would you play a boy named Bruno? Bruno wasn't much of an athlete but he actually turned into a pretty good catcher, living into the position that fit his name.

In my college fraternity everyone had to have a nickname. Yogi – Slim – Lizard – I was "Ingy" – names given in loving jest – designated what we loved most in a person – the guy who was always asking questions at the fraternity meetings, who was always pondering the deeper significance of last weekend's fraternity party, we called Plato.

But friends, too often names are not loving. There are names that represent our cruelty to others – names that are descriptive, but painfully so. Peewee – Fatso – Hunchback – Squeekie. Can you feel the pain of having such names, or closer to home, do you *know* the pain, the pain of a name that hurts, traps, confines? Yes, it makes such a difference in how we are named.

Today's gospel lesson is a story about a woman. In some translations, she is identified as the "bent woman". In the original language, she is literally, "bending double". How would you like to be immortalized in scripture like that? She was bent over, says our translation, had been bent over, staring at the ground, back terribly contorted, for many, many years. She doesn't appear to have a name to anyone in town. When they saw her creeping down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to lift up from the ground, they didn't say "Here comes Mary," or "Look, it's Ruth." They said, "Here comes the bent woman, the crippled woman." What a terrible name – what a heavy burden to bear.

Yes, the woman doesn't have a name, other than the one given to her by the town, a name based upon her disability. That was her name and in her name was her life, her destiny. She doesn't have an identity other than that of a victim. She doesn't have a family, it seems, no occupation we know of, nothing other than her deformity. She is the one who is bent, stooped, bearing upon her shoulders an invisible yet very heavy burden, the burden of being different, the burden of not looking like everyone else, the burden of not being able to do what everyone else does. She is the crooked woman, the bent double woman.

She is there, suggests one commentator, for everyone who is so named. Named because they are different. She is "just a drunk," "retarded," "stupid," "a druggie." Add to those various slurs ethnic, religious, gender, sexual orientation, and racial slurs. Terrible names – all of them.

In the synagogue this woman is encountered by Jesus. And how Jesus refers to her. Jesus heals her and that is wonderful. For the first time in her adult life, she is able to stand up straight, to look straight ahead.

But perhaps just as wonderful is the way Jesus speaks to her, what Jesus says about her. He does not call her disabled, or hindered, or bent woman. Rather, Jesus calls her “a daughter of Abraham.” I think that’s significant. This one whom we, even the Bible, calls the crooked woman, the bent woman, is called by Jesus – “daughter,” “daughter of Abraham.” What does that mean? (I am indebted to William Willimon, mentioned below and in the “Sources” for this theme.)

Remember Abraham was the patriarch, the granddaddy of the nation of Israel. As our Old Testament reading said, God promised to bless him, to make a great nation of him and his wife Sarah, and more importantly, a nation through which *all* the nations of the earth would be blessed.

And the woman in our gospel lesson is called a daughter of this same Abraham. She is an heir to these blessings of God. Moreover, as a daughter of Abraham and Sarah, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than just living with a heavy burden. She, who was the bent over woman, is in a sense renamed to signify that she is a part of God’s great salvation of the whole world. As she is transformed by Jesus’ healing touch she is reminded of the name she has carried all along, her most fundamental name, “daughter of Abraham,” in other words, a child of God. She is called by that name to signify her renewed identity. I agree with the Biblical

commentator William Willimon, who has certainly influenced this sermon, when he says that even if she *hadn't* been healed, Jesus' calling her by this most fundamental name would have given her a renewed identity. It's a name to live up to and to live into – she is a daughter of Abraham, a child of God. She who has been blessed with healing is to be a blessing to the world. Her life has been renamed, not as a long story of sadness, but as a part of God's great story of redemption. Yes, naming – it's so important!!

Friends, at baptism, God gives each of us a name, our basic, fundamental name. That name is Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ.

There is a true story that I have shared with some of you once before that a Presbyterian pastor tells about one of his embarrassing, funny moments in ministry that makes just this point. He was in the middle of performing a wedding ceremony, just about to lead the couple through their vows, when, all of a sudden, he forgot the name of the groom. Trying to cover the awkward moment, the pastor asked the groom with great solemnity, "With what name were you baptized?" The groom, a bit taken aback, paused. After all, this wasn't in the rehearsal! But then with great confidence, he responded, "I was baptized with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!" This didn't help the pastor at all, but at least this groom understood the meaning of baptism! (Story cited by Marj Carpenter) Yes, in this sacrament are named Christian.

Friends, unfortunately, some of you at least, some of the time, have been unfairly named by others. Given negative, maybe even abusive names that are hard to shake, that demean and devalue your personhood. Our New Testament

lesson and baptism give you hope -- for God gives each one of us *first* this basic fundamental name— child of God, Christian.

And some of us, perhaps most all of us, at some time or another have been name-callers, especially in the heat of anger, even calling loved ones something unkind, unloving. Baptism and our Scripture lesson call us all to a new way, a better way, a better name to give others -- we call them children of God and we treat them as such. This is not only a word *we* need to hear in the church but a word that also needs to be heard in social media, public, and political spheres of our national life. God help us.

And then there are some of us who have named our own selves unfairly. In the midst of the darkness of depression or self-despair – we have named ourselves in demeaning ways – saying we are incapable, unworthy, unlovable. But our passage begs us to consider that we all have dignity and value in God’s eyes because we have been named as one of God’s own.

We are reminded of this at the waters of baptism where we are given a more revealing and fundamental name – “Christian.” That name, whenever it is given, is a gift – unearned, unmerited, undeserved – like salvation itself – a gift from God. We predict that this child’s life, this Christian’s life, will be a long story of growing into the name, coming to embody that name, living into God’s gracious dreams for us.

My prayer for you, my friends, is that, by God’s grace, with Clint Roberts as your new pastor, you will continue to live up to and into that name, the name Christian, living into God’s gracious dreams for you as individuals,

families, and a congregation. What does that look like? Perhaps the charge I use most Sundays, found in our Book of Common Worship and taken from several Scripture passages, says it best:

“Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the suffering; love and honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

And to God be the glory. Amen.

SOURCES

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