

Sermon for June 19, 2016 – “What’s In a Name?”

12th Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts(s): Luke 8:26-39

A man was invited for dinner at a friend’s house. Every time the host needed something, he preceded his request to his wife by calling her “My Love,” “Darling,” “Sweetheart,” and so on. His friend looked at him and said, “That’s really nice after all of these years you’ve been married to keep saying those little pet names.” The host said, “Well, honestly, I’ve forgotten her name.”

Names are powerful. This is especially true in folklore and mysticism over the centuries. In various traditions, there’s a notion that something’s **true** name expresses or is somehow identical with its true nature. That knowing someone’s true name gives you power over that person. For example, in Egyptian culture the true name of the Egyptian sun god Ra was revealed to Isis through an elaborate trick which gave Isis complete power over Ra and allowed her to put her son Horus on the throne. Another, perhaps more familiar example can be found in the story of Rumpelstiltskin, by the Brothers Grimm. In the Jewish mystic tradition, Kabbalah, there are 72 names for God and they’re seen as keys to one’s ascent up the Tree of Life, each name being capable of opening another gate of light and another dimension of God’s vast consciousness. It was long traditional in Europe to have a secret name for a child, a name which was kept secret until the christening and which was not used every day. Popes take on new names. So do kings and queens in many places. Closer to home for us Christians, in Genesis, Adam is given the power to name all the creatures of the earth, thus symbolizing his dominance over them. Names are powerful.

Need more proof? Think back to when you were a kid. What is the worst possible sign you could’ve that you were in trouble? Your mother speaking your full name. “Jeff, get over here!” simply does not have the same spine-chilling effect as, “Jeffrey Louis Colarossi, get over here!” Or think back to grade school... You know, that special time when kids become surprisingly good at inflicting emotional damage on each other with just a few words or nickname. Nicknames like: Stupid. Fat. Ugly. Skinny. Egg-head. Klutz. Nerd. Dweeb. Some I can’t repeat here. And this is just a small sample. From them, we’ve learned the lie of our mother’s well-intentioned but utterly false pronouncement: “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” The sad truth is that it didn’t end in adolescence. We’ve learned **subtly** in the years since grade school and junior high, but not always compassion. True or not, names hurt because they not only have power to **describe** but also to **define**. These names, what we’re called and what we call ourselves, can serve as the boundary markers of our imagination. They have the ability to limit who we are and what we can do, even, what we can become. The names we bear create a self-fulfilling future that can feel, and often become, nearly impossible to overcome.

Which is what breaks my heart about the answer the demon-possessed man gives Jesus when he asks him his name. “Legion,” he replies. In doing so, he acknowledges that he no longer has a name of his own, that he is now only known by his illness and the magnitude of his domination by evil forces. I think that’s why I imagine Jesus’ healing him as something akin to giving him a new name. You know, like when Abram and Sarai are given the new names of Abraham and Sarah, and with them an open future with the promise of a child. Like when Jacob encounters the angel (who, by the way, refuses to divulge **his** name) at the River Jabbok. There, confessing his checkered past and shoddy character he receives the name, Israel. Like Simon who becomes Peter, and Saul who becomes Paul.

Names, good ones **and** bad ones, are powerful. So Jesus doesn't just cast out his demons, freeing him from them, He gives the man a new name and with it a new and open future. Which I'm thinking had to be terrifying if not for him, then certainly for everyone around him. What am I talking about? Well, think about it. Don't we learn to live with our demons? Don't we get used to having to deal with our misery, anxiety, and fears? Don't we get used to our pecking orders and systems of definition, injustice and discrimination? The people who knew the possessed man were used to Legion. They were used to his shackles, to his ranting and raving, to having to guard him. As bad as he was he'd become part of the moral and social order of their world. And so when the demons leave and he's now just plain old Bill, or Frank, or Schlomo or Mordecai, or whatever his name was, they don't know what to do. In fact, Luke tells us, they're down right **upset**. And don't be confused by the business with the pigs at this point, these folks didn't get all worked up because someone lost some swine. Oh no. It's Jesus' ability to rock their world and create unforeseen and unexpected futures that terrifies them. If he can do this to Legion they wonder, what might he do to us? And so what do they do? They ask Jesus to leave, and he does. But not before first conferring with the one who received a new name and future at his command. The man, understandably, wants to follow Jesus. We get that. I mean we get it that he'd want to give his allegiance to the One who healed him. Wouldn't be the first time that someone Jesus heals wants to follow him. And seriously, who'd want to stay with the folks that

a) will always see you as the one foaming at the mouth, and

b) who seemed kind of upset to see you healed?

Luke tells us that the man actually **begged** Jesus to let him follow him (Imagine that, begging to follow Jesus) but Jesus tells him to stay home. He tells him to proclaim to those around him just how much God has done for him. And that's exactly what the man does. It's no easy task giving up the exotic for the familiar, trading the exciting for the mundane, missing the possibility of a new adventure for the tedium of the ordinary. But maybe this is the only way that these Gerasenes will get it. If they're too afraid of Jesus, then maybe they'll learn to live with the witness that this man, once Legion, now healed and whole, represents.

So here's my question: as a church – what do we make of this story? Can we become a church willing and able to bear witness to Jesus' ability to heal? Where old names are replaced with new, more meaningful ones? Do we have the ability to become a church willing to accept our role in the healing process? Are we indeed able to help bear one another's burden? Encouraging one other to live into the new lives God intends for us? Again, not an easy task. It is, in fact, a huge task, I know. It's also very much a slow one. Slow because systemic change, genuine transformative change that goes all the way to the core takes time. I think we are able. I happen to think we do a pretty good job already. But, if we think there's no room for improvement, we're kidding ourselves.

So, how do we do this? Where do we start? How about right here, right now, in worship? See, I think our weekly worship services are a good place to start. Seriously, think about it...What better place to start? I mean, each week we have the opportunity to gather together. Each week we have the opportunity to confess, to name, honestly, openly, if at times silently, those demons that keep us up at night and chase us throughout the day. The demons which are legion. And then we get to hear proclaimed to us, and not for the first time, but this stuff's hard to believe, so we repeat it, that we are forgiven, That we are healed, That God has called us by a **new** name, That he has a new way for us, a new future open to us.

In Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet in the famous balcony scene in Act 2, Juliet asks the question, "What's in a name?" She tells Romeo that a name is an artificial and meaningless human convention, and that she loves the person not the name. In response to this, Romeo rejects his family name and says to Juliet, "Call me but love and I'll be 'new baptized.'"

As it happens, we're called by God's love and given a new name at our Baptism. The name of Christ. We're given our identity and sealed in the promise of life, abundant and eternal and with it we're given the promise that no matter what happens, no matter where we may go, no matter what we may do, no matter what may happen to us, we're given the promise that God will always hold us in the same regard as Christ as his own beloved child. And so, as we're armed with a new name and solid promise of a new future, we're sent out into the world to bear witness to the world to all that God has done for us. This may, I know, seem like small stuff in the face of the hardship and oppression that too often seem to govern our world, in the face of evil, in the face of the demons that revealed themselves in Orlando, San Bernardino, Fort Hood, Sandy Hook, Aurora and so on. But keep this in mind, Names really are powerful. Powerful enough to hurt and harm, certainly but also to help and heal. Indeed, names, especially the one God gives each of us, have power...**Real** power. Power to end oppression...Power to alleviate fear and anxiety...Power to cast out the demons that torment us...Power to disrupt discrimination and injustice...Power to nurture community and effect reconciliation...Power to create a new and better world – and affect a hopeful future. In all these ways and more, God's name for us has the power to lead us from death to new life... Power to overcome the world!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.