

WPC
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What's In A Name?
Psalm 71: 1-6; Luke 13:10-17

I'm the only person I know who got to choose my own name.

I came to the United States from Korea when I was 4 years old. My Korean name is Kyung, a name my classmates and teachers at school struggled mightily trying to pronounce correctly. In fact, they massacred the pronunciation. I became known as "Key-Yong" at school (sounded to me like "Donkey Kong"). I hated that, since that was definitely NOT my name.

The summer before I entered 6th grade, a golden opportunity presented itself to me. My family moved from Daly City to Oakland, and I would be starting at a new school. My parents asked me if I wanted to choose an English name for myself. Definitely!

So I played around with possible names. Steve...Jim...Joe...no, that didn't quite fit me. After playing around with other possibilities, I finally decided to choose "Ken." And that is now my legal name: Ken Kyung Sunoo.

But it's rare that we pick names for ourselves. Our parents give us our names. Or we're nicknamed by other people. And sometimes these

names, these nicknames, are not at all the names we would have chosen for ourselves.

We all know of nicknames given in loving jest, designating what we love in a person – “The Kid,” “Speedy,” “Class Clown.”

Yet there are other not so generous names — “Peewee,” “Fatso,” “Dummy.” These names represent our cruelty toward others, rather than our love.

One commentator tells of a man he knows, middle-aged, who refused to join him in a bowl of ice cream. He pressed him, urging him to join him in eating the forbidden calories, saying, “Why on earth are you so concerned about your weight, you’re not fat?”

“But I was,” he said.

“Really?” he asked. “That must have been a long time ago.”

“It was. As a kid they called me ‘Chubby.’ That name stuck with me all through college. I hated it. I smiled when they said it, but inside I was dying. I swore to God that one day, nobody would call me that.”

“Can you feel that pain, do you know that pain, the pain of a name that hurts, traps, confines, cuts to the heart?” (William Willimon)

It makes much difference how we are named.

Shakespeare wrote – “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” And we know what he means. Words are just words on one level.

But on another level, words are not just words. We know the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” And we know that often, that’s not true. If you, like me, have ever been on the receiving end of a racial slur, you know words can hurt. If you have ever been the recipient of a sexist comment, or been put down for not being smart enough, pretty enough, athletic enough, you know words can carry a ton of weight. If you’ve ever read *The Grapes of Wrath* then you know that to be called an *Okie* was to be viewed as less than fully human.

Today’s gospel is a story about a woman. In our Bibles she’s identified as “the crippled woman.” William Willimon asks – “How would you like to be immortalized in Scripture that way? She was bent over, 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 Elizabeth.’ They said, ‘Here comes the bent woman, the crippled woman.’”

That was the nickname given to her; she didn't choose it. We don't know this woman's family name. We only know the one given to her by the town, a name based upon her disability. She is the crooked woman, the bent woman.

And suddenly she is encountered by Jesus, who sees her and decides to heal her. Notice, this miracle is sheer grace on the part of Jesus. The woman doesn't approach Jesus, she makes no request of him, and nothing is said of her faith. Jesus simply takes the initiative to heal her. Once healed, she praises God.

After the leader of the synagogue becomes indignant at Jesus because he healed the woman on the Sabbath, notice what Jesus does. He renames her.

Jesus calls her "a daughter of Abraham." That's significant. This one was known as the crippled, crooked, bent woman, is called by Jesus a daughter of Abraham. What does that mean? Who was Abraham?

"Abraham was the great, great-granddaddy of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, a promise was given. God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

She is a daughter of Abraham. She is an heir to the blessings of God. Moreover, as a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than superficial, cruel, limiting labeling. She, bent over though she is, is part of God's great salvation of the whole world." (Willimon)

She stands up straight. Her life had been renamed. And things will never be the same for her again.

Jesus means to name us as well. The world may burden us with nicknames we don't want, but Jesus reminds us that you are daughters, you are sons of Abraham. Your life counts, because we are invited to participate in God's great drama of redemption.

Therefore, in our church, when we baptize a baby, we ask what name has been given to the child – "John Edward" or "Joan Cynthia." And then, instead of using the family's last name, we say, "Child of the covenant." In other words, we give the child a new name - "Christian." And our prayer is that the child will grow into that name.

Fred Craddock tells a story of meeting a man one day in a restaurant.

"You a preacher?" the man asked.

Somewhat embarrassed, Fred said, "Yes."

The man pulled a chair up to Fred's table. "Preacher, I'll tell you a story. There was once a little boy who grew up sad. Life was tough because my mama had me but she had never been married. Do you know how a small Tennessee town treats people like that? Do you know the words they use to name kids that don't have no father?"

"Well, we never went to church, nobody asked us. But for some reason or other, we went to church one night when they was having a revival. They had a big, tall preacher, visiting to do the revival and he was all dressed in black. He had a thunderous voice that shook the little church.

"We sat toward the back, Mama and me. Well, that preacher got to preaching, about what I don't know, stalking up and down the aisle of that little church preaching. It was something.

"After the service, we were slipping out the back door when I felt that big preacher's hand on my shoulder. I was scared. He looked way down at me, looked me in the eye and says, 'Boy, who's your Daddy?'

"I didn't have no Daddy. That's what I told him in a trembling voice, 'I ain't got no Daddy.'

"'O yes you do,' boomed that big preacher, 'you're a child of the Kingdom, you have been bought with a price, you are a child of the King!'

“I was never the same after that. Preacher, for God’s sake, preach that.”

The man pulled his chair away from the table. He extended his hand and introduced himself. Craddock said the name rang a bell. He was the legendary former governor of the state of Tennessee.

You also are a daughter or son of Abraham, a child of the Kingdom. Your name, whatever else we may call you, is “Christian.” You’ve been bought with a price, you are a child of the King. Stand up straight, act like it, and never forget your name. Amen.